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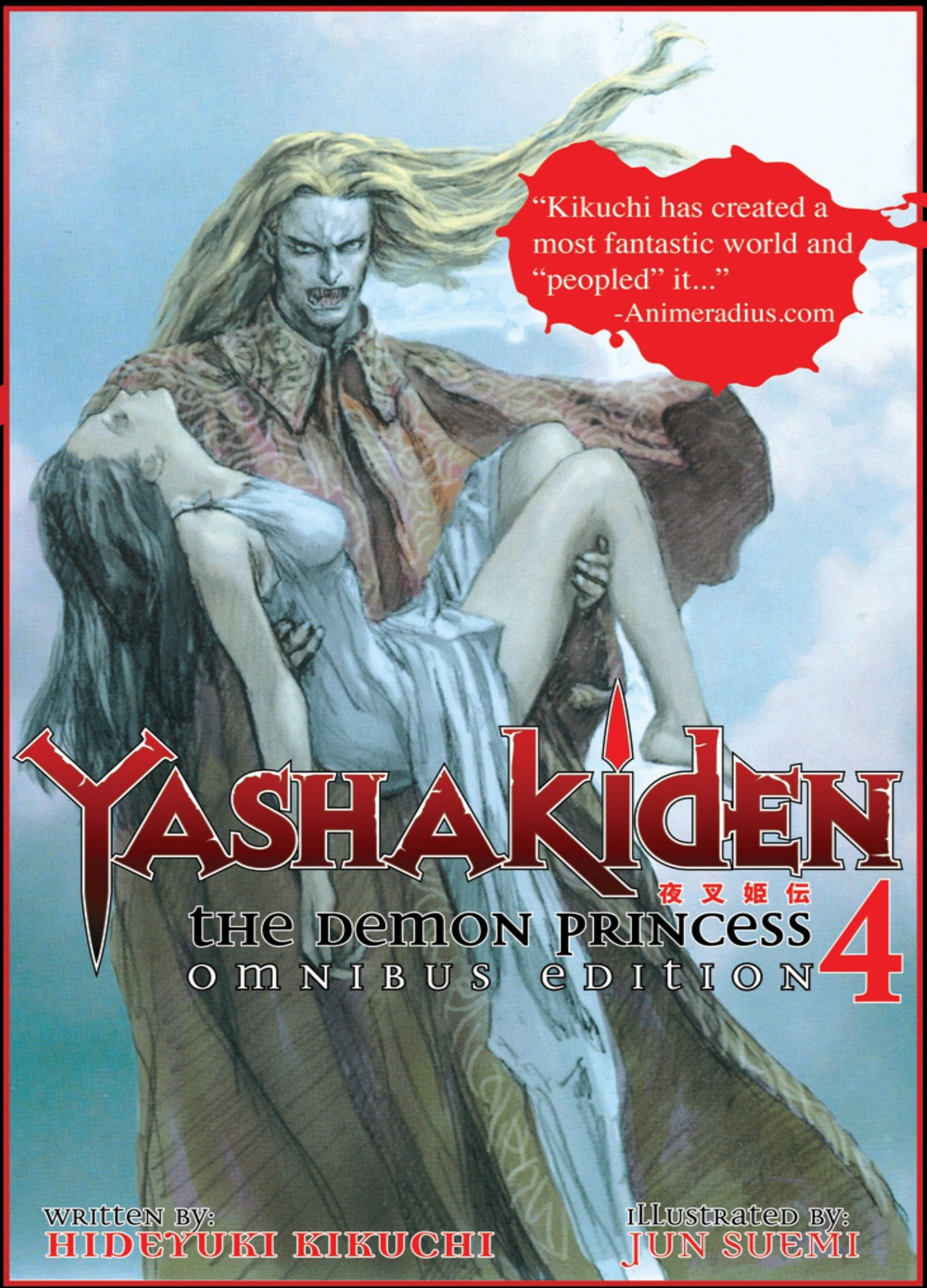

"Kikuchi has created a most fantastic world and "peopled" it..."
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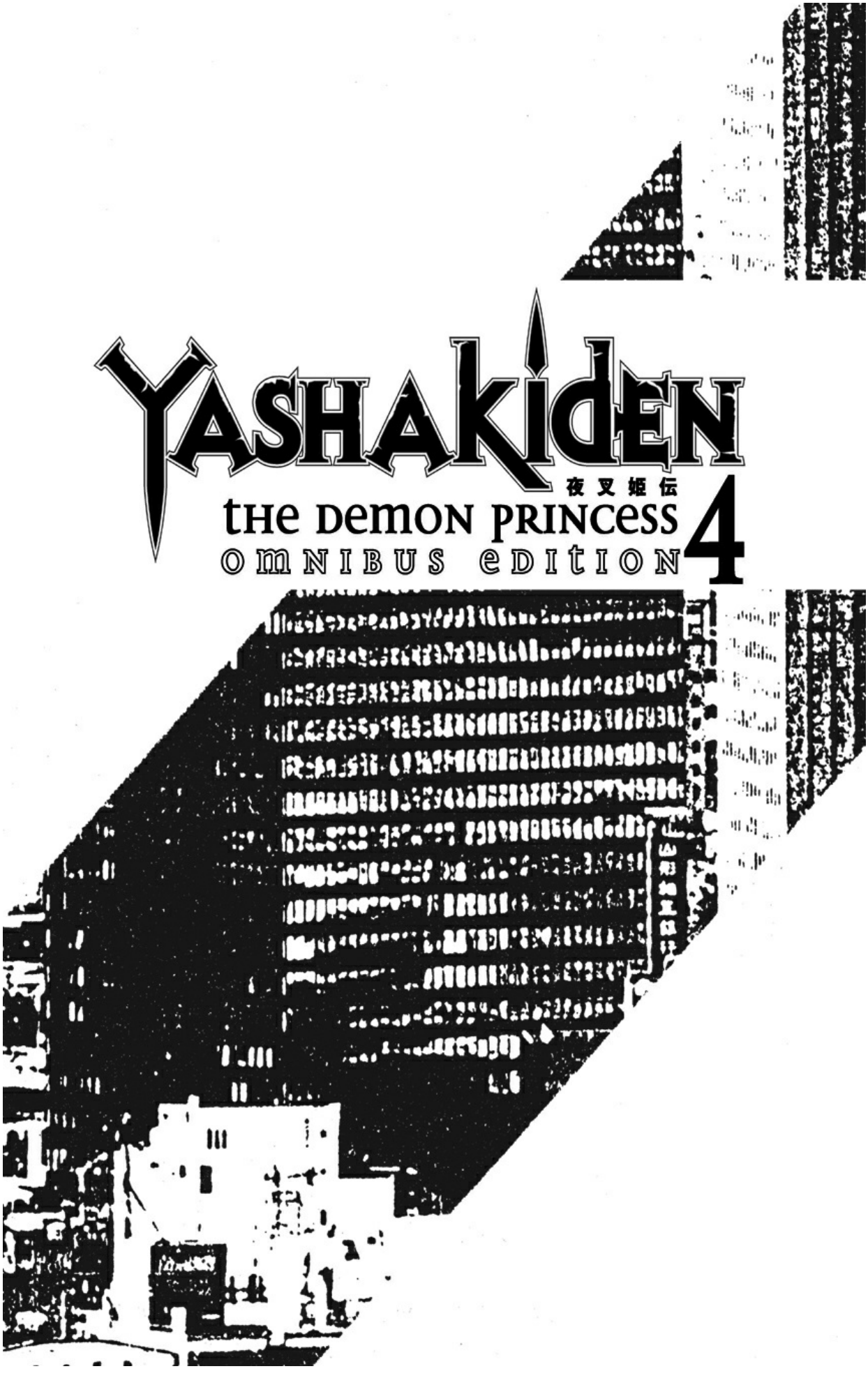
YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS
OMNIBUS EDITION 4

WRITTEN BY:
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

ILLUSTRATED BY:
JUN SUEMI


YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝
THE DEMON PRINCESS
OMNIBUS EDITION
4

Author's Bio

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in the city of Choshi in Chiba Prefecture in 1949. He graduated from Aoyama University. His auspicious debut came in 1982 with the publication of *Demon City Shinjuku*.

In 1985, his classic work Makaiko was published in three volumes, propelling him into the ranks of bestselling authors. As his loyal readers can testify, one dazzling burst of creativity after the next has taken him from success to success. Since then, his supernatural thrillers have sold almost seven million copies.

Originally published in a set of eight single volumes, Kikuchi's masterpiece will now be released as five epic omnibus volumes. Welcome to the fourth bloodcurdling book of *Yashakiden!*

YASHAKIDEN
夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 4
OMNIBUS EDITION

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
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English Translation by
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DMP
DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING
Los Angeles

Yashakiden: The Demon Princess Vol. 4 Omnibus Edition

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English Edition Published by:

DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING

A division of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

1487 W 178th Street, Suite 300

Gardena, CA 90248

USA

www.dmpbooks.com

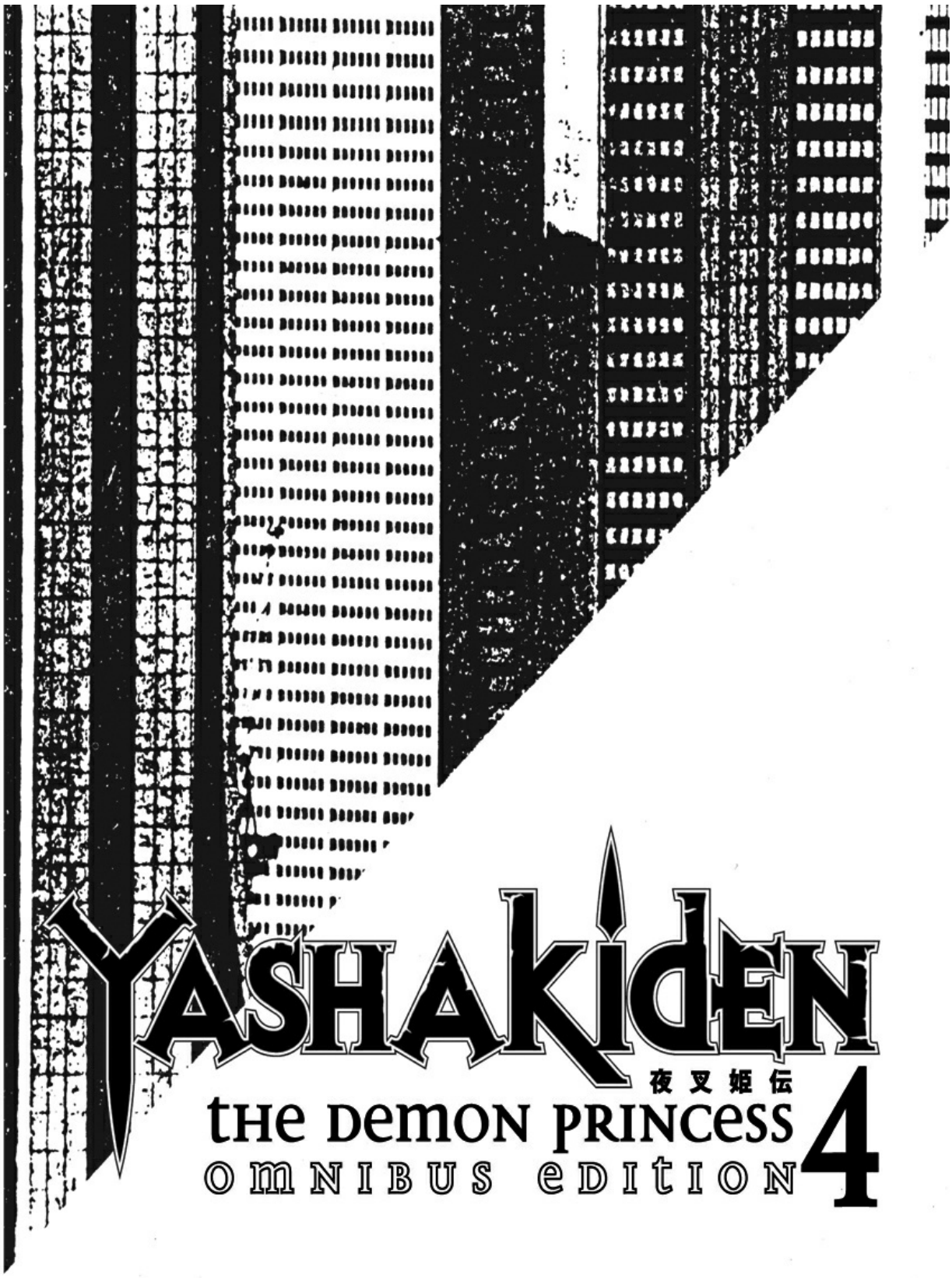
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available Upon Request

First Edition: June 2011

ISBN-13: 978-1-56970-148-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada



YASHAKIDEN

夜叉姫伝

THE DEMON PRINCESS 4

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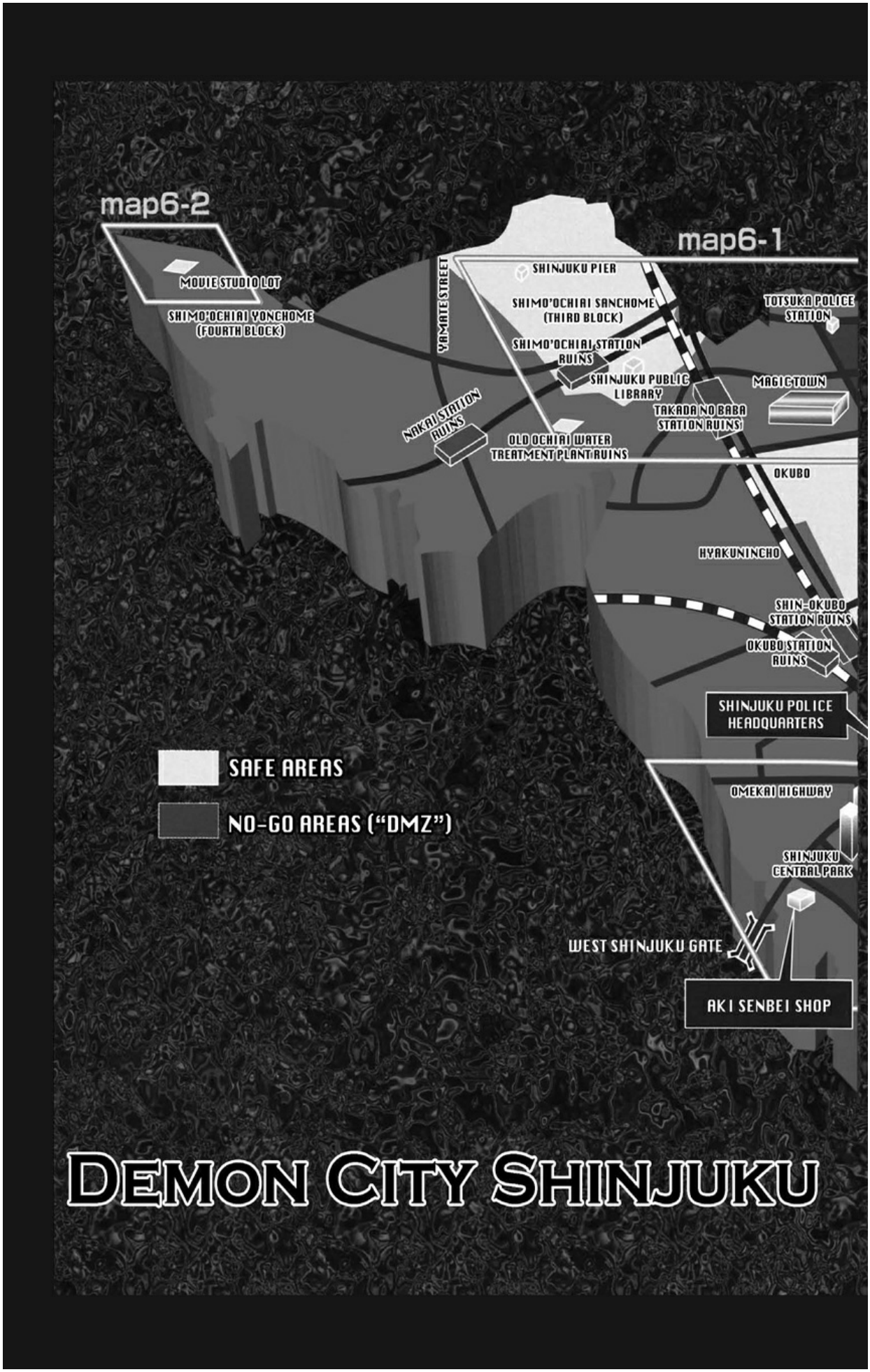
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SHIMO'OCHIAI YONCHOME (FOURTH BLOCK)
YAMATE STREET
SHINJUKU PIER
SHIMO'OCHIAI SANCHOME (THIRD BLOCK)
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SHIMO'OCHIAI STATION RUINS
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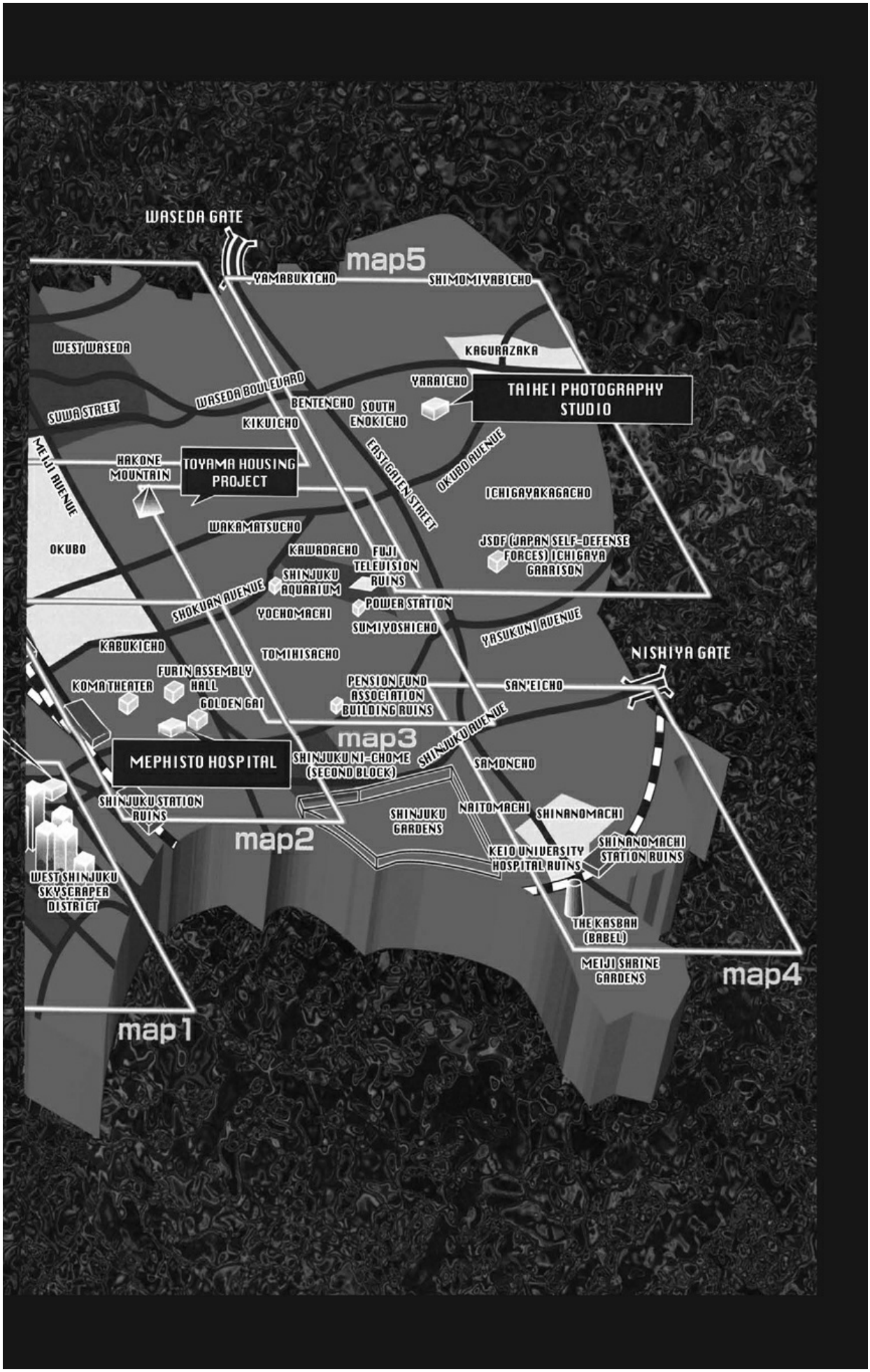
OMEKAI HIGHWAY
SHINJUKU CENTRAL PARK
WEST SHINJUKU GATE
AKI SENBEI SHOP
DEMON CITY SHINJUKU


WASEDA GATE
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KAWADACHO
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map4
map1

Main Characters

Setsura Aki

The manager and owner of a *senbei* shop and P.I. agency. A handsome man with magical powers literally at his fingertips, he defeats his enemies by wielding strands of sub-micron thin "devil wire."

Mephisto

It is rumored that the "Demon City Physician," as beautiful as he is feared, can even bring the dead back to life.

Princess

The Chinese vampire Biki—as gorgeous as she is evil—has wandered the world for four thousand years in search of a safe refuge for herself and her followers.

Kikiou

This crafty old warlock is Princess's principal retainer. He desires to subjugate all of Demon City Shinjuku.

Ryuuki

A later addition to Princess's retinue but also a vampire, he plays the mesmerizing ghost koto *Silent Night* and wields a powerful, death-dealing *qi* at his command.

Shuuran

A vampire and servant of Princess, she can fashion killer vampire dolls from her own blood.

General Bey

The blond, blue-eyed vampire who can defeat his enemies by using their own weapons against them.

Takako Kanan

A college student specializing in ancient Chinese history, she is swept into supernatural conflict because of her obsession with the mysterious Daji from the Hsia Dynasty.

Yakou

A vampire who lives in Demon City's Toyama housing project, he is the grandson of the Elder, who was defeated and killed by Princess.

Galeen Nuvenberg

The Czech Republic's greatest wizardess and current resident of Demon City's "Magic Town." Her servants include a blue-eyed doll and a big obnoxious raven.

Lieutenant Matthews

Commander of an elite squad from the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces, sent into Demon City to eradicate the vampires.

The Story So Far

Having surmounted four thousand years of space and time, the beautiful Chinese vampire known as “Princess” has appeared in Demon City Shinjuku. She is accompanied by her supernatural retainers Kikiou, Ryuuki, and Shuuran.

Setsura Aki launches a heroic battle to the death to keep them from seizing control of Demon City. Galeen Nuvenberg and the Elder are defeated and Setsura is badly hurt. Demon City Shinjuku is becoming Vampire City before their very eyes.

Meanwhile, Setsura’s erstwhile ally, the inscrutable Mephisto, is behaving in an even more mysterious manner than usual.

Part One: The Citadel

Chapter One

A strange hallway.

Strange because it was so flat and smooth. Utterly unremarkable. The white walls on the left and right continued on forever. Nothing that looked like an exit or entranceway interrupted the inlaid planks and beams.

“What the hell?” Setsura scratched his head. The sort of mundane gesture that, when made by him, would make any passerby want to stop and lend a hand. “Does this look familiar to you?”

“No.” Pretend Takako shook her head.

Along with the real Takako’s appearance and knowledge, Kikiou must have added a fragment of his own memories, so that if they were not killed in the room below she would lead them into a different maze. All the more reason to have a really bad feeling about these cascades of corridors.

“Well, let’s go,” Setsura said encouragingly.

Her presence weighed on his mind. But he could no more abandon the facsimile than the real thing. For having stuck by him, Kikiou would kill her without a second thought.

Setsura cast out searching strands of devil wire and got back—nothing. No matter the direction, no matter how far—a half-mile out and back. He gave up. The hallway had no beginning and no end, as if space and time turned back on itself through a fourth dimension.

He tested the walls and easily cut them but didn't penetrate them. They had an infinite thickness.

"No point to that," Setsura said, reeling the wire back in.

A concerned look came to the face of Pretend Takako. Her eyes were drawn to the hole in the floor through which they'd just come. It had closed. Kikiou or Yakou must have done it. The sealed floor now yielded to the devil wire no differently than the walls.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Pretend Takako.

"I fear it will be the same no matter where we go. Rather than aimlessly walking around in circles, waiting for the enemy to arrive may paradoxically offer the best chance to escape."

"Yes, but it's still very frightening."

"I'm with you on that," Setsura said. He patted her on the shoulder, as if to suggest this was all just a big misunderstanding.

Pretend Takako burst out, "You're a strange man."

"You think so?" Though as he scanned the hallway, Setsura was no less wary than he always was.

"Yes. The memories implanted by Kikiou-sama make you out to be very scary."

"How naughty of him," Setsura said peevishly.

Though this Takako looked exactly like the real thing, everything she knew about Setsura had been implanted by Kikiou. Such a reaction wasn't unexpected.

“But I don’t find you frightening in the least. The way you can cut through the walls and ceiling is amazing, not scary.”

“Sounds like I’m not being intimidating enough. I’ll have to work on that.”

“No.” Pretend Takako shook her head.

A strange emotional tie seemed to be forming between the odd couple that was this young *senbei* shop proprietor and the counterfeit girl.

Setsura narrowed his eyes. Pretend Takako spun around. The sound of footsteps, short and quick, running toward them. Not bare feet, but shoes like sneakers.

“Who is it?” Pretend Takako asked anxiously.

Setsura cocked his head to the side. The footsteps turned into a human shadow.

“It’s a child.”

“Yes.”

Perhaps noticing them as well, the shadow came to a halt. A boy of seven or eight, about four feet tall, wearing a blue Chinese-style outfit. They were about a hundred yards apart. His ruddy cheeks suggested a child coming indoors on a crisp winter day.

Pretend Takako smiled and the boy smiled back, both expressions of honest delight.

Setsura observed that the boy was holding a black rod in his right hand. The boy ran toward them while reaching out his right hand and

touching the wall with the rod. A black line appeared on the wall exactly as long as he'd run. The rod must've been made of charcoal or graphite.

The line stopped fifteen feet away from them. And so did the boy. His face suddenly flushed. Setsura was seized by a strange sense of apprehension.

"Hey, kid," Pretend Takako called out.

The kid set off at a sprint past them, drawing the black line on the floor. This time he stopped and abruptly sat down in front of the wall. As they watched, he drew a figure on the floor with his small hand.

Starting from a stick figure outline, he drew one—then two—then three—soldiers, holding a sword, a spear, and a halberd. There was hardly anything abnormal about boys showing interest in soldiers and weaponry. And though childish in appearance, his rapid brush strokes were nevertheless praiseworthy—a bull covered in armor, a soldier holding a staff, flowers of some unknown species—

He stopped. Pretend Takako said again, "Hey, kid—"

"Keep your distance," Setsura warned. "Those pictures—they possess a demon spirit."

"But—"

He grabbed her bodily and pushed her behind him. The hallway filled with glittering light. It reflected off the spear and the sword and the halberd—now in the hands of the three soldiers.

They glared at Setsura and Pretend Takako. There was no telling what historical era they came from, though logic dictated that they were likely soldiers of the Hsia Dynasty over which Kikiou had once wielded his power and influence. The diamond-shaped helmets, the breastplates and shin guards were all different from anything Setsura had studied.

The three marched forward. They appeared to be real human beings, down to the smell of alcohol on their breaths, not the slightest bit like “moving pictures.” Setsura noticed as well that the drawings matching them had disappeared from the floor.

Their martial spirits surged ahead of them like a wave as they drew closer. They’d covered a half-dozen feet when Setsura cast out his devil wire. And felt a response.

The heads of the three should have toppled to the floor. But they continued onward, not a mark on their necks, the murderous vibe brimming from their expressionless faces.

“So there’s no taking scissors to these paper soldiers,” Setsura observed.

The devil wire again danced around them. Severing lines appeared here and there on their weapons—and disappeared.

“Or to their weapons,” he mused. “This certainly sucks.” His voice was soft and his countenance serene.

The swordsman whipped his weapon through the air. Dodging the blows took all of Setsura’s effort and speed. The wind from the sweep of the steel grazed his chest. He ducked and wove as the halberd jabbed at his neck from the side. He felt a funny twinge in his back foot. He stumbled off balance. The sword slashed down at his upper body. Just as the lancer leapt into the fray.

Before the tip of the spear could penetrate his chest, the spear flew from its wielder’s hands. A strange sight indeed.

The spear slanted through the throat of the staggering swordsman and into the stomach of the soldier with the halberd. The swordsman laughed. With his free hand, he grabbed the shaft of the spear and yanked it out and tossed it to the lancer. The three pressed on with their attack as if nothing had happened.

Their bodies were obviously immune to the effects of their own weapons. Determined not to let themselves be so disarmed again, they gripped the hilts so tightly their knuckles turned white.

Setsura shifted his stance. He tested the floor for pitfalls with his devil wire and found a fissure four inches wide. As for its length—

He faced the immortal soldiers. “Hmm,” he said in admiration. The fissure precisely followed the line the kid had drawn with his lump of graphite. It was quite amazing—picture soldiers that sprang into action—a line that grew into a ditch—

Setsura glanced down the hallway. The kid was nowhere to be seen. He’d drawn a rectangle on the wall, with a thing like a handle. It must be a door. The little artist had hidden himself in there.

The blade of the halberd descended like a calving glacier. Setsura jumped backwards, smiling a smile like the rays of a winter sun on a cloudy day. The soldier’s murderous rage momentarily wavered.

Something strange was born in that moment.

The swordsman whirled around and sank his sword into the shoulder of the lancer—just as the blade of the halberd plunged into his abdomen—just as the bloody tip of the spear protruded from the chest of the soldier wielding the halberd.

“Puppeteer,” Setsura Aki murmured.

The soldiers vanished.

“Whoa!” Setsura waved his arms, lost his balance, and sat down heavily on the floor.

“Setsura-san!” Pretend Takako ran up to him. Glancing up and down the hallway, she asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I think I sprained my ankle. Ouch.” When Takako went to touch it, he said, “No, it’s okay. I think I’ll be able to walk.”

“I hope so. Here, let me help you up.”

“Thanks.”

His smile made her heart melt. She said hastily, “Um, those three soldiers, how did you do it?”

Gingerly rubbing his ankle, Setsura said, “They were immune to my threads and to their own weapons. But not when they were actually holding onto their own weapons.”

“How did you know to make them attack each other?”

“When I sprained my ankle, the swordsman and the guy with the halberd were both swinging at the same target. The swordsman altered the direction of his attack. Reflexively, perhaps, but with obvious effort. This suggested a conscious desire to avoid friendly fire, so to speak.”

He flashed a strained smile in response to Pretend Takako’s admiring glance, and got to his feet. “Yeah, it hurts.”

Pretend Takako quickly supported his wobbling frame. “We’d better go. There are pictures still unanimated.”

“And there’s the artist. I’m sure that kid could draw a door for us.”

“Do you think he’s waiting?”

“Two pictures remain, no doubt for cleaning up whatever the other three couldn’t get done.”

Confirming this speculation, a loud bellow echoed out behind them. The armored bull and another swordsman. They were covered from head to foot with silver metal, looking more like armored

vehicles than flesh and blood. Another one of Kikiou's inventions.

The swordsman's right hand flashed. The bull shook its head. Nothing reflected in its eyes. Only the swordsman and Setsura knew that his devil wire had been severed.

"The sword and the armor are made of the same materials. They're safe from friendly fire."

The bull lowered its head and pawed at the ground, preparing to rush them. It must've weighed close to half a ton. Add on top of that Kikiou's magical armor. This was no ordinary big bull.

The massive hooked horns were each a yard in length and almost a foot in circumference at their thickest, tapering to sharp points aimed right at Setsura's heart.

Pretend Takako's fingers dug into his shoulder.

With a harsh screech, the soldier drew his long sword and tossed the scabbard aside. It clattered on the floor, making Pretend Takako flinch.

The bull had torn through the devil wire with a toss of his head, the soldier with a flick of his sword. How would Setsura deflect the attack to come?

Chapter Two

The Demon Princess and the real Takako were taken to a room in one of the twin spires of the imposing Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex. It was located in a corner of the skyscraper district only a stone's throw from Chuo Park and the DMZ. No irony was intended.

The Joint Operational Forces hovering in the air on standby retrieved them from Kio Shrine and flew them at high speed the third of a mile to the roof of city hall. Surrounded on all four sides by magnetically-levitated armored combat hovercrafts, they were escorted inside the bleak government office building.

The reality they found there would have knocked the ordinary citizen for a loop, for the stark, forty-eight story building was teeming with life.

Human life and mechanical life, epitomized by the people striding down the broad hallways—the walls had been knocked down and the hallways widened—and the rooms filled with the radio-luminescent glow and blinking LEDs of electronic equipment. These buildings—that after the Devil Quake had become a squatters town—had been transformed into a great citadel, proof that when a nation set its might and authority into motion it might even raise the dead.

The two were brought to what had once been a reception area on the second floor. A glittering chandelier hung from the ceiling. The

furniture and even the wallpaper managed a subtle combination of the baroque and the somber.

The ordinary taxpayer would have sighed in amazement and dismay at the sheer expense and effort required to pull off this demonstration of wretched excess.

But it all fell short, fading like a wilted flower when Princess entered the room in her white *cheongsam*—a pile of refuse compared to the sublime beauty of this woman, even with half her face burned off. *Beauty was life*. The inorganic could possess that life as well, but in her presence it felt as dead as a doornail.

Needless to say, the same went for the people waiting in the room. Faces flushed, adrenaline levels surged, heartbeats raced in a frenzy. And yet the officials lined up there in their business suits didn't feel a thing. Her beauty—like the unveiling of a secret, national treasure—benumbed and transfixed them.

One fearless and intrepid figure stood out from the rest. Stepping forward he said, "Forgive me, but how should we address you?"

"Call me Princess." The sound of her voice cut through them like a sharp wind. "That is what this world calls me, and that certainly includes you."

No official proclamation could match such haughtiness in tone or substance, but no critical thought crossed any of their minds. They all knew that none in the world could fairly contradict her.

"We understand." The man bowed humbly. "Shall we proceed with the introductions?"

“Fine.”

“I am Takeshi Jinnai. I believe we have already met.”

“Yes. The man who threatened me. I will not forget.”

She smiled. Less an insinuation than the impression left by Jinnai himself. Jinnai stiffened. With a flutter of her white sleeves, the Demon Princess proceeded to a sofa at the back of the room. Takako trailed after her, standing to her right as she settled against the cushions.

“I’ll hear what you have to say,” she said in a low voice that reverberated around her like a distant sonic boom. Nobody objected.

Jinnai said stiffly, “But first, we would like to tell you more about us.”

“Fine,” she said, with a frigid glance at the poobahs and bureaucrats arrayed before her. She nodded. Her sense of dignity and presence was different from the typical pol. No, it was her very *existence* that was different.

Facing Princess and beginning from the right of the line of officials, Jinnai gestured and said, “Hikobe Abe, chairman of the Joint Staff Council. Next to him—”

With each introduction, the man bowed deferentially. And although he described each man’s position, Jinnai had no idea whether Princess attached any importance to it. But he thought it better not to skip any of the customary manners and protocols.

He came to the end of the line and the man on the far left.

“Ryohei Kongodai, our prime minister. As I am sure you know, he is the chief executive of our national political system.”

Princess shifted her gaze to the balding politician. “Kikiou would find that fact far more interesting. He’d kiss up to the lowliest politician in order to accomplish his ends.”

Kongodai’s face twitched in annoyance. Not a few others smiled to themselves.

“We have gathered here together to request your cooperation.”

Jinnai kept things ceremonial. He dearly wanted to loosen his tie, but kept his hands at his sides. The tanks hovering in the hallway, their guns aimed at Takako through the walls, was their one ace up the sleeve. The heat-seeking lasers were renowned for their single-shot kills.

“Our request is singular in nature. While under our patronage, we wish to further investigate the particularities of your life force.”

“Where is Bey?” Princess interrupted. “Kikiou is a vulgar man who prides himself in his knowledge and nothing else. I once thought that Bey might rise to the occasion, but he was the mere ruler of a savage land stinking of shit and sweat. Do you think I would permit your soiled hands to touch my skin? Never. You have stated your case and now I will leave.”

She casually came to her feet. Jinnai said to the graceful white figure, “Please wait. We warned you before. Outside this room, the guns are trained on that woman.”

“Go ahead and fire.”

Whether Jinnai caught the seductive gleam in her eyes, what he did clearly see was the mass of people pushing their way toward Takako. He couldn't believe his eyes. At the head of the flying wedge of politicians was the chairman. Right in front of Takako was the prime minister.

"The head of the government," Princess sneered. "Emperor Jie of the Hsia Dynasty and Ying Zheng of the Qin Dynasty did the same, using me as a shield against the assassin's sword. I suppose *she* suits the princelings of a teeny-tiny country like this. Shall we call each other's bluffs?"

Jinnai didn't have the authority to make the order.

"I'll be going now. If you hold your lives dear, then be good boys and clear the way. I can't have those awful machines in the corridor flitting through the air and spying on me. Because this is the kind of thing that will happen if you do—"

The Demon Princess seized the chairman by the hair and spun his head like a top. His neck creaked and his skull did a complete three-sixty. The muscles didn't contort, the flesh didn't tear. Only large tears fell from his eyes. Colored red. Tears of blood.

"A twist of the neck without killing. Can anything be more painful than that? I'll wring one neck if one of those vehicles follows me. Two if two do. Every time I see another one, I'll add another to the mix. No, no, send them all. The more the merrier. It's so much fun watching you cry in living color."

She shrieked with laughter and started toward the exit. A large shadow darkened the doorway.

“General Bey.”

The Demon Princess smiled. That alone told Jinnai how she intended to manage the big man. A gentle smile.

“And where are you going, Princess?” said Kazikli Bey. His voice creaked like a drawbridge.

“Back to my kingdom.”

“That is here.”

“I will leave the management of this miserable country to you. Oh, and take care that none of the rats stowing away in your casket start gnawing on your privates.”

“I see.” Now Bey smiled as well. A gentle smile. “But leave the girl.” By which he meant Takako.

“What accounts for such tenaciousness? Your first bride did not strike me as that great of a catch.”

“I have already decided. She shall become my wife. I do fancy her quite a bit. So let her be.”

“I think not. Your maddening unreliability pisses me off. If you like this place so much, it’s all yours. We may have occasionally shared a bunk during the five hundred years of our voyage together. But I’m just not that into you.”

“Unacceptable. What I want right now is that woman. And when it comes to you, the feeling is mutual. You may leave without another word.”

In response to the challenge, Princess’s smile only grew broader.

General Bey said, “Why do you care about her? Why not drain her of her blood? Kill her or make her your slave. Are you losing your memory? Didn’t you once cast her out of the sky?”

“You want to know?”

“Enlighten me.”

“I did it to annoy a certain man. The one man who scorned me. I wish him to prostrate himself at my feet and plead to drink my blood. She is necessary to make it happen.”

“Setsura Aki.” General Bey spoke the name with a true depth of feeling. A flesh and blood expression resembling a thunderstorm. It vanished a moment later. “After fighting atop that tall building, I chanced across him a second time. Why does he still live? He fell from such a height, and with a sword in his heart.”

“I must have missed the mark,” Princess said in a voice that could freeze boiling water. And yet there were hints of a thaw at the edges.

“I thought so too. The kid was my opponent. It seemed a blunder on your part. But perhaps not.”

“Hoh.”

“Then that was no blunder. You missed on purpose.”

“What fascinating things you are saying.”

“Princess—the woman who has lived for four thousand years and toppled countless nations—the woman who has driven tens of thousands wild with lust. Not you—”

“Why choose her to be your wife?” she said, cutting through the

stream of his speculations.

"For the same reason as you," General Bey said heavily. A person with sharp ears and keen mental insight might have detected in his reply the same ambiguities as in Princess's answer. "Five hundred years ago, when the Janissaries surrounded Poenari Castle, a woman threw herself from the parapets and died. The blood of the Orient flowed through her veins. This woman well resembles her."

Princess raised a hand to her mouth and smiled. "So Kazikli Bey, the most famous butcher in the history of the world, still pines for his wife. If your subordinates could see you now, they would turn over in their graves at the thought of ever following and dying for such a weakling."

"I owe nothing to the living or the dead. The woman stirs my blood. That is all. Take your leave, Princess."

"By brute force? Look around you. All I need to do is *this* and she is mine, without taking one more drop of her blood."

General Bey understood what Princess was talking about as soon as she spoke. She placed a finger between her breasts and drew a line down her body. The gown neatly divided in two, revealing her dazzling limbs. A bright red line welled up on her chest.

With a low savage growl, a herd of beasts pushed past General Bey and ran toward her. The august government ministers. The cabinet secretary was among them, as was the director of the National Institutes of Science and Technology, and the director of the Defense Agency SP Division.

With a swipe of a hand, their heads tore away from their bodies like plucked fruit. General Bey roared in despair. Takako buried her face between Princess's breasts, her throat pulsing as she lapped up rivulets of fresh blood.

Chapter Three

Such a rare beauty—the girl drinking blood from between her breasts—on the one hand it transfixed the line of men standing in her presence. And on the other, caused another man to literally convulse in his boots, and rattle the room with his great dismay.

"Bastard! Bastard! Bastard!" he sang out, as the three heads toppled to the floor.

Princess gently held Takako's head and smiled at him. "Who do you think I am, General? This girl now serves me. Could anything pain Setsura more? Or you?"

The scorn was not at an end. Neither was the despair. The scene wasn't over yet. Takako's throat pulsed as she continued to swallow —the blood of the vampiress—in a trance.

The cries of anguish changed. Here was the end to the despair. Now erupted the fury. Bey turned to the JDF commanders. "What are you doing? What are you looking at? You promised! Deliver this girl safely to me and I would give you the secrets of eternal life. You have ruined everything! No, I swear, this woman, I will seize her with my own hands and bring her to your autopsy room where you may dissect her to your heart's content! In the name of Kazikli Bey!"

He charged Princess like a lurching giant, aiming at her white throat. She didn't move. He seized the suckling Takako by the shoulder. In turn, Princess grabbed Takako around the waist and

spun her around to face him.

The sound of breaking bones and the smell of blood. Takako smiled a complacent smile as the startled General Bey reflexively stepped back.

Ah, the licentious grin on the face of this smart and trim college student. Drinking blood and having it drunk—what a red-stained future awaited her. Not showing the slightest pain from her broken shoulder, Takako wrapped a white hand around the general's neck. Her lips were red and wet.

"Are you the one who seeks me?"

Her hand squeezed as tightly as an iron vise, clenching his neck with enough strength to choke a sumo wrestler. Not human in the least.

General Bey gently grasped her wrist and pulled it away, as if loosening the grip of a child. "Good night," he said, and struck her in the solar plexus. Takako fainted. A vampire fainting was a strange sight, but the blow had been delivered by one too.

Princess quickly retreated out of reach. Takako raised her head. "Too bad, Bey." The voice was Princess's.

"You fucking wench."

The general started running. No sound of pounding feet as he leapt into the air and landed behind Princess with a quickness that was closer to teleportation. He struck at her chest with a *nukite* blow, his fingertips closed together like the tip of a spear.

A cry, and blood frothed at her lips—Takako's lips. Startled, he drew back his bloody hand, hearing Takako and Princess's derisive laughter.

"Hoh. First you break your beloved's shoulder, then stab her in the chest. What next? Have at her. She is not the perfect servant, but her body has already been endowed for that duty. Gouge out her eyes, tear out her tongue, rip off her breasts, gnaw at her privates—it's all fine by me!"

To toy so with the general of the dead—who made even Setsura Aki tremble—such humiliation was impossible to fathom. To take this dear girl, transform her into a vampire, give her an immortal body, and then destroy it by the general's hands—such cruelty was even more impossible to fathom.

"I won't kill her. She won't die. But she will suffer, General. Break the shoulder and pierce the chest—anyone would feel the pain. But she will not die. That is why I laugh. You must understand that as well."

No smile could be more evil. Or more lovely. Even the general was stilled for a moment, before his face once again clouded with wrath.

"Release her. And I shall do you the honor of drawing and quartering you myself."

He spat out the hateful words as he brought his hand to his mouth. He demanded her liberation as he tasted her fresh blood. He licked his hand as a child would a spatula—this was the expression of his love.

On one side a fairy, on the other the devil. At the mercy of the fangs of these two unworldly monsters, the entranced Takako was an indescribable amalgam of misery and lust.

Elite soldiers like Jinnai with actual combat experience under their belts stood frozen in place by the ghastly carnage before their eyes. They were fighters to the core, who would execute their own families if so ordered. But while choking back tears.

Even when annihilating a merciless enemy, the darkness would dam up in their souls. With every mission accomplished, it would only increase and could never be expunged. They truly believed that acknowledging its existence would stand in the final judgment as a tribute to the dead.

And yet what they saw as these two toyed with this innocent girl was the cruel temperament of a child that delighted in breaking the arms off a doll, gouging out the glass eyes, hammering nails through the plastic chest. If the inanimate were given voice, it would surely bewail its outcast state.

“I haven’t the time for this,” Princess said in a frigid voice. She put her arm around Takako’s waist. “I only came here to obtain hostages that would ensure my safe return. Well, whatever. Thanks to you being here, she is mine. Wrack your brains over that one, you idiot. She will never be yours. Forever. Hoh! I’ll leave it to you to untie that Gordian Knot. Do you know how?”

“I know. And now I shall do it,” General Bey said darkly.

“Get back! You want this girl torn limb from limb?” The rebuke hit him like a slap across the face. As if by design, Prime Minister

Ryohei Kongodai tottered in front of Princess. “The leader of the nation, eh? Not much of an escort, but you will do. And if Kikiou is still alive, I’m sure he will want to see you. The two of you can discuss the fate of this little smudge of a country.”

Kongodai led the way as Princess backed out of the room, using Takako as a shield against General Bey’s malevolent intentions. Jinnai and the others hadn’t counted on the prime minister more or less voluntarily stepping forward as a hostage. And neither did the general charge after them. Her threat to draw and quarter Takako wasn’t a bluff he could risk calling.

Princess exited into the hall. The armored hovertanks floated there forward and rear of her position. The only person their laser cannon could vaporize right now was the prime minister.

She looked at the hovercrafts. Each of the tortoise shell-shaped hovertanks contained three operators. The instant the pilot looked into her eyes through the periscope, a singular thought arrested all other activity in his brain.

Princess’s lips moved. “Destroy.”

As the disbelieving ministers looked on, the hovercraft in front suddenly rammed the one behind at full speed. An indecipherable shout was drowned out by the sound of crushing steel. The hovertank in back spun around and buried itself into the wall on the right.

“What the hell are you doing?” shouted the co-pilot and communications officer of the struck vehicle. He lurched toward the pilot just as the hovertank whirled around again, throwing him

against the gunner hard enough to knock the eyes out of his head and snap the gunner's neck.

The pilot didn't even look to see what was going on behind him when he switched the firing controls into the navigation unit. As if covering the retreating Princess, he fired at the hovertank still embedded into the wall with his 120 mm cannon.

The hot ruby light bathed the heat-resistant ceramic armor in a red glow, penetrating the shell in two seconds. The fuel erupted in flames. The shell cracked like an over-boiled egg. Fire and light streamed out, growing into an expanding fireball that beat at the blast walls before scorching and battering them to pieces.

With no place else to go, the high-pressure sheet of plasma raced down the corridors, cutting down Jinnai and the ministers like a fiery scythe and turning them into kindling. At the ends of the hallways, it smashed through the windows and lunged out into the air, roaring at the endless night like a fire-breathing dragon.

"Well, well, well!" Somewhere the beautiful voice spoke in admiration. "Of course. I did not imagine she would enter the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex of her own free will."

"That fire is in the direction from which I am being called." A voice filled with rust. "Do I have any choice but to go, Shuuran?"

Holding Takako and Prime Minister Kongodai to her waist, Princess descended the stairs like she was treading water. The howls of sirens echoed all around them. No sound came from her footsteps. A good eighteen inches separated the bottom of her feet from the ground.

Laser light penetrated the ceiling, incinerating the people running after them.

“Ah, how sweet. Please, rain down more fire, more death and destruction upon their heads. That’s the only way to make this country into a more agreeable place.”

A turbine whine resembling the sound of a loud horsefly reached their ears as soldiers in military fatigues closed in on them. The three carried a tactical atomic cannon called the “Juggler.” They took up firing positions, but were held up by the sight of Prime Minister Kongodai.

In that moment, Princess took off. Leaving her clothing behind. Naked. Her black hair streamed behind her like a comet’s tail. Her breasts swayed. Her thighs throbbed.

The beauty of this leap was a unique kind of beauty in and of itself, that ruled over death and destruction. The instant her white hand touched the soldier setting up the Juggler, his head and helmet flew away like a helium balloon.

Before the blood erupted from his now headless torso, she had kicked it away and with her hands and feet plucked the heads off the remaining soldiers and sliced and diced their bodies. There was an aesthetic in this dance of death that entranced them even as they died.

Princess looked down at the Juggler still clasped in the soldier’s bloody hands and beckoned to Prime Minister Kongodai. The most powerful politician in the country walked over like a man sleepwalking.

“Hold this,” she said.

The prime minister cradled the weapon in his arms and staggered. She seized him by the scruff of his neck and drew him to the hillocks of her breasts. Her chest was smeared with blood, the blood that Takako had sucked.

Their surroundings were on fire and fragrant with the smell of burning flesh. Blood and saliva drew a speckled pattern on her chest. The prime minster’s full lips pressed against her breasts. His tongue lapped at her nipples. His cheeks sucked in and out.

Then a wet slurp as she pushed his face away. Not bothering to wipe his mouth, muddied with blood and gore, he stared enraptured at the Demon Princess.

“From the manner in which those soldiers were deployed, this weapon should be loaded. Pull back that bolt.”

The metal alloy and carbon fiber construction notwithstanding, the fully loaded 150 mm atomic cannon must have weighed a good sixty pounds. But the prime minister operated it with ease.

“Release the safety. This lever, I suspect. Put it to your shoulder. That’s right. Aim it over there somewhere. Doesn’t matter where.”

She pointed at the hole in the second floor left by the hovertank. Here was further evidence of her truly terrifying nature. The hole in fact led directly to the ammunition vault in the second sublevel basement.

The prime minister nodded. The light from the blazing inferno flickered across his entranced face as the cannon round traced a lazy

arc through the air. At that moment—

The astonished Princess whirled around. The expression on her face broadcast the magnitude of the blunder she had made. Takako was where she had left her. Standing next to her was the Herculean outline of a man.

“General Bey—so you’re still alive.”

Part Two: Demon City Desolation

Chapter One

Toshie Sakamaki sobered up almost as soon as they left the bar. "Damn. What's with that?" she said in a disgusted voice, patting her cheek.

"Yeah," Shigeo Tanaka agreed with a slight lisp. "The fucking alcohol they serve there—you end up just pissing it away."

Toshie grimaced. Tanaka gave her a wink, then looked back at the establishment they'd just visited. They couldn't have taken more than five or six steps, but the neon lights were already a good twenty yards away. They'd probably had enough for the night, after all.

"Hey, what do you want to do?" said Toshie, clinging to him.

"Whatever you feel like. It'll be tomorrow in another ten minutes. We could try a change of scenery. Or go home. I'm good either way."

"Doesn't it feel kinda sad and lonely around here? Isn't this Okubo Station?"

"Yeah, you're right." Tanaka glanced nervously around them.

For the past four or five days, the deserted ruins of the station seemed to stand out more than usual. Today, it was like a sore thumb. Okubo's famous "drinking stands" were all closed. Only a handful of the more established pubs had their signs lit, even though the night was just getting warmed up.

Tanaka recalled something the bartender said, and the memory

made him shiver. Why remember that here and now?

"I don't really get it myself," the bartender had mused. "But it's like Okubo is dying. Reminds me of my mom. She was always the heart of the family, always bustling about. But the birds fled the nest one by one, and she needed something else to lean on more and more. And then one day she just laid down and died. Same goes for Okubo. Every day when the dawn comes there are more shut-ins, more stores that never open. These days, the place looks like home to the walking dead. Creeps me out. All those bowed backs and wan faces. They start to come into the bar and stop at the *noren curtains*. But one day they'll keep on going. Just my intuition, but that's the day I close up shop."

"Hey, let's go home."

Toshie's voice brought Tanaka back to the present. "Yeah, let's. The night shift bus should be arriving soon. Where's the bus stop?"

"This way," said Toshie, sounding a bit fed up with her wishy-washy lover. She pointed into the gloom and started off ahead of him.

Tanaka masked his fretful thoughts with a self-deprecating grin. Times like this, all he could do was let things sort themselves out.

Five minutes after they got to the bus stop, the headlights approached.

"That's funny."

"What?"

“There’re usually a few more passengers waiting at this time of night.”

“I suppose. Whatever. The bus is here.”

The door opened as the hydraulic brakes were applied. The two climbed the steps one after the other. They flashed their passes but the driver was too tired to bother checking.

Thanks to the dim lighting inside the bus, they hadn’t been able to tell from outside. But at least eighty percent of the seats were filled. They all had their heads bowed. Nobody looked at them. Tanaka felt a seriously bad vibe. And no wonder. This wasn’t the peaceful outside world. This was Demon City, where a single cockroach could eat a human being for dinner and no one would be surprised.

The bus started moving again as soon as they got on. They found open seats near the back. A sense of calm returned. Thankfully, they would both be getting off at the number five stop, in front of the Okubo Institute for Chemical Research. No need for just one of them to sit at the back of this shitty ride cooling his heels alone.

Literally. “It’s cold,” Toshie said a minute later.

Tanaka had thought the same since getting on the bus. The air conditioner was on too hard. He felt goosebumps on his skin. Either the bus driver didn’t care or he ran hot all the time.

“Just put up with it.”

“Yeah.”

However right the customer might be in cases like this, it was their job to "put up with it." These buses alone improved the safety margin for the second shift and overtime workers by a good eighty percent. They charged extra outside the ward, but were good enough to run the bus on a fixed schedule. Putting up with a few minor inconveniences was worth it.

A recorded woman's voice announced the third stop. They'd passed the first two without noticing.

"Nobody's getting off," Toshie observed.

The passengers sat there, heads bowed, hardly moving at all. Tanaka could hear his heart beating in his ears.

Two more stops. In any case, they should be able to trust the driver. When Tanaka looked back at Toshie, she was gazing out the window. And seemed to be shaking a bit.

He tapped her on the shoulder. "The next one after this."

"Why aren't any of them getting off?" she asked, her voice fraught with fear and anxiety.

"Because it's not their stop."

"A lot of people are always getting off. You know that."

"Tonight must be special."

The woman's voice announced the fourth stop. Tanaka looked up at the stop button. It wasn't lit.

"This is weird."

“We get off at the next stop, so don’t worry about it.”

“Nobody can get off! We’re stuck here forever!”

She was crying by now. For fuck’s sake! The woman was almost twenty-one and she was carrying on like a little kid.

“*Next stop, Okubo Institute for Chemical Research*.”

As if struck by the voice—Tanaka couldn’t help but imagine the speaker’s haughty face in front of the microphone—he hit the button. The purple light flickered inside the plastic housing. The bus began to slow.

“We’re getting off,” Tanaka said with a forced sense of calm.

Toshie nodded. The familiar landmarks approached. The bus stopped. The two came hastily to their feet. And then stopped in their tracks. The aisle was blocked. All of the other passengers stood up too, their heads slumped to their chests like deflated balloons.

“No—no—no—” Toshie grabbed his arm, her hands like pincers.

Tanaka didn’t feel the pain. “They’re all getting off,” he said.

With the sound of compressed air venting, the door opened and one by one the passengers descended the stairs.

“Hey, let’s stay on.” Toshie shook his arm. “Let’s stay on.”

“But—” Tanaka said reluctantly. He felt the pressure on his back, the passengers walking forward. “Okay. We’ll stay here.”

Somebody grabbed his left arm. Tightly. He felt the cold chill through his clothing. “What the hell—?” was all that came out of his

mouth before he was dragged down the aisle. “What’s going on? Who the fuck are you guys?”

He twisted his body, only to have his right hand pinned as well by the guy in the seat in front. And hard enough to make him completely lose his voice. With Toshie struggling and complaining behind him, he was dragged as far as the door.

The driver sat there on his black vinyl seat, staring blankly ahead. “Help—” Tanaka tried to say, but his tongue wouldn’t move. The two of them descended the stairs to the ground. The bus took off. The passengers didn’t stand there. They silently trudged along the road.

Ordinary residences surrounded the Institute grounds, but no group of commuters or day laborers had ever trooped home so weirdly as this. There were no cars or other pedestrians on the street.

The sense of impending threat faded behind him. Toshie had apparently given into the inevitable as well. Tanaka felt himself being drawn toward a certain fate. The white wall of the Institute came up on his right as they proceeded south. The wall transitioned to a chain-link fence.

This was the off-grid generator facility for the Institute, rows of transformers and power converters beneath the low-hanging loops of high tension lines. They stopped behind the building housing the generators. One of them grabbed the chain-link fence and shook it. A six-foot section came loose. This must be the place they were aiming for.

They all trooped in. The fence was put back in place. Tanaka and

Toshie continued around the building with the others.

Lights were on in the building. Somebody must be in there. Somebody not like the weirdoes on the bus. Somebody with red blood flowing through his veins, a cup of hot coffee in his hands, chatting about the weather and talking about the good old times.

Behind the building was a thirty-foot circular divot in the ground roughly in the shape of a grinding stone.

It probably hadn't been attended to since the Devil Quake. On one side, the weeds had grown into a wild and unkempt mass. There might be more medicinal species of weeds growing there too. But it was the kind of place that the more lethal insects and monsters liked to inhabit.

The building's foundation rose a good ten feet above ground level. A fifteen-foot-long fissure snaked out from where it touched the rim of the "grinding stone." The rooms underground would have caved in, now useless as research facilities. At some point, the monsters had likely made their nests there.

Several people plunged into the crevice ahead of them. Then the two were forced inside also. A six-foot slope of earth and concrete slanted down to the floor, preventing a vertical drop. Tanaka was a little surprised they'd even bothered with such amenities.

Standing in the basement, at first the pitch black was completely opaque. The man next to him didn't let go, but stood there rooted to the spot with the rest of them.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, Tanaka perceived that

they were in a fairly large room. A laboratory or a parking garage. There weren't any cars. Or tables or chairs. There was something else—here and there flickered small lights like candles. Tanaka strained his eyes to make out what they were.

Steel lockers lying here and there in the wide open space. Bumps in the floor due to piles of dirt and sand. Beside the lockers, he could make out chests of drawers, private Buddhist altars, all lying on their sides.

Tanaka grasped the true nature of the room's inhabitants. Fleeing sunlight, sleeping inside boxes under the earth. No, not boxes—caskets.

"You—all of you—on the bus—"

"Hunting," one of them said, not one of the passengers.

Holes in the walls led to adjoining rooms and hallways. The silhouettes of others came through them. Men, women, old and young and children. Salarymen and office ladies. A cook still wearing his apron. A barber in a white smock and with scissors in his hand. A musician with a guitar strapped to his back. A cop.

Pale as ghosts, fangs gleaming in the corners of their mouths.

"I'm sorry for this," said an old man in a yukata. "But we simply must invite you to join our little club. It does get cramped in here, you know? But we do need to eat."

A shove from behind. Toshie screamed. The blood-red points of light advanced on them from all directions. As the strong fingers dug into their throats, Tanaka knew it was the glow of hunger radiating

from their eyes.

Chapter Two

"Well, this is a bit of a pickle," Setsura said, stroking his jaw. "If ordinary weapons won't work, we're pretty much screwed. Unless we can use them against each other like before."

That would be well-nigh impossible in this case.

The bull stamped on the ground and charged Setsura. Just as Setsura realized the soldier had vanished from his line of sight. The bull's body suddenly crouched down on its forelegs. From its hindquarters came the glimmer of armor and the light reflecting off it, soaring past its head.

Timing his run with the bull's sudden stop and attacking from above as his opponent fanned at empty air. Going high and going low simultaneously, leaving him at a loss as to how to respond, splitting his head down to his waist.

Except that, beneath the sweep of the sword—powerful enough to cleave a large boulder in two—Setsura was also gone.

He'd leapt ten feet back. The collar of his slicker, though, showed a fresh scar. More than a split-second decision, he had readied himself to retreat from the charging bull from the very start. Even so, he'd made it only by the skin of his teeth. These were formidable opponents.

The joints of the armor sang out as the soldier stepped forward with his left foot, the sword raised high over his right shoulder. His

entire frame was wrapped in glittering strands of light as thousands of the thread-like wires cocooned him.

The swordsman stirred.

“This gonna work?” Setsura muttered to himself.

The stirring turned to a tremor. The swordsman stretched out his arms. The shimmering twine shattered into grains of silver and scattered in all directions.

Setsura sighed. “Would you look at that.” He hadn’t harbored high hopes for the strategy. This business of appearing to take things less seriously than they deserved was an affectation more associated with young irresponsible scions of large fortunes.

Without a sign of being stalled in the least, the swordsman marched forward. The steps were a bit clunky, but he had the control of a maestro down to the tips of his fingers. This was a fearsome martial talent on display.

The bull sidled up to him, a mass of killer instinct.

“Hey,” Setsura called over his shoulder to Pretend Takako. “That was sure a troublesome bit of graffiti.”

“Yes, it was,” Pretend Takako answered in a frightened voice.

Setsura could only count his blessings that they had what little room they had to maneuver in. Pretend Takako added urgently, “Setsura-san, the hallway is coming to an end!”

“Eh?” Setsura glanced around. Another ten feet behind Pretend Takako was a soaring wall. “So the infinite just became the finite.

How stingy."

Pretend Takako didn't answer this time. The situation was too pressing.

"Get on my back."

"What?"

"Hurry."

Pretend Takako climbed onto his back. He turned to face his attackers. The swordsman stopped a dozen feet from them.

As comical as it might appear, this was no laughing matter. These beings—born out of mere scribbles—existed only to kill anyone who visited this hallway.

"You scared?" Setsura asked.

"Um—no."

"Well, I'm ready to piss my pants. This chap is quite the handful."

"It'll be okay," said Pretend Takako, her voice constricted to almost a squeak.

"You sure?"

"As long as I'm with you, I won't be afraid."

"I appreciate it," said Setsura, and charged.

His chances weren't good by himself, to say nothing of having another along for the ride. The long sword whistled through the air,

as if to separate the one from the other. But then the soldier's onrushing target suddenly disappeared from before his eyes.

They had soared upwards before the information could travel from his eyes to his brain.

Setsura looped the devil wire around a beam in the ceiling. The big bull was the one who caught on first and reacted to the Tarzan and Jane act. With a watery snort, it whirled around and stomped against the floor, intending to run them through as soon as they landed.

But the bull hesitated, pivoted and stopped. The ferocious face peered up at two people suspended in the air above it and tossed its steel-clad horns. They were just out of reach.

Setsura looked down at the enraged bull and said airily, "This is all fine and good, but I'm not sure how we're getting down."

Heavy footsteps followed one after the other. The swordsman rushed down the hallway. The bull folded its forelegs. The armored soldier planted a foot between its horns. The bull reared up.

"Whoa!" Setsura burst out, as the intrepid figure sailed through the air. He quickly backpedaled.

The sword swung down. The devil wire broke. The murderous bull waited below them. A surprised expression slowly filled the soldier's features.

Setsura stood in the air another yard off to the right. He'd flung out another strand of devil wire. It was hard to say whether the results were any less humorous than they were impressive. The best

description might be that he'd faked the swordsman out of his shorts.

Except that the big bull had moved directly beneath the swordsman and once again reared its head. The leaping swordsman's face, mad with bloodlust, was suddenly spotted by something white and fluffy, like a pillow had exploded in front of him.

He lost his balance and fell without a sound.

Up to then, the equally mad bull had no idea what was going on. His partner would, as always, bounce off his head. But the soldier couldn't get his feet under him and fell onto the bull's horns.

Pretend Takako averted her eyes.

"That's all he wrote," Setsura said breezily. He jumped down to the ground, landing just as the sword of the gored soldier fell to the floor.

A fierce light glowed in the mad bull's eyes. It had apparently drawn the connection between Setsura's actions and the death of its partner. Not bothering the shake off the corpse pinned to its horns, it charged at Setsura and Pretend Takako.

Setsura reached out his right hand. The sword spun around and flashed through the air and into the hand—of the soldier.

In the next moment, to the surprise of both the mad bull and Pretend Takako, the soldier seemed to reanimate, flipping over and driving the sword through the base of the animal's skull.

The bull roared once and fell over.

“It disappeared,” said Pretend Takako.

Though it was more the bull’s last gasp that reminded Setsura of the familiar face of a certain fat informant.

“What in the world happened?” asked Pretend Takako, not grasping how Setsura had used his devil wires to turn the swordsman’s corpse into a human marionette. She goggled at the spot where the soldier and the bull had disappeared after drawing their last breaths.

Setsura turned around. Pretend Takako said “Eh?” and followed his gaze.

A person was standing at the other end of the hallway. The kid, looking as if he was playing hooky from school. If he was one of Kikiou’s creations, that suggested a deep knowledge of the manners and customs of this world. The kid gazed back at them, and then pointed at the wall. Pretend Takako couldn’t see, but Setsura could make out a drawing of a bull and several people. They had returned to their former abode.

“Is this your world?” Setsura asked.

The kid didn’t answer.

“Sorry to have to say this, but we need to get out of here. How about drawing us an exit?”

Pretend Takako tensed up on his back. If there was another monster coming, she didn’t want to see it. The hallway fell silent for a while. The kid made the first move. He turned around and ran. Setsura followed in hot pursuit.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Pretend Takako said frantically. “Put me down.”

“That’s okay. I owe you one.”

“For what?”

“I hit the swordsman in the face with those flowers you picked.”

The swordsman would be more than a little pissed to know that he’d been temporarily blinded by a bunch of pretty flowers. Or perhaps he would only smile at the irony as he gave up the ghost.

A wall rose up in front of the small retreating figure. On the wall was a door. The kid pushed it open. Setsura and Pretend Takako followed him through it.

And found themselves in another hall like the one before. With one big difference. The walls on either side were covered with graffiti. People, bulls, horses, dogs, cats, ships, fishes, flowers from all four seasons.

The kid stepped to the side. There was another door. Setsura stepped forward and put his hand on the knob. It turned easily.

“Um—” said Pretend Takako, shifting on his back.

Setsura looked at the kid. He leaned against the wall and stared back at them. Without the magical black chalk in his hand, he could have been any normal kid. The pouting might even qualify as endearing.

“He’s here all alone?” Pretend Takako wondered.

“Probably.”

“With nothing but the world of these corridors and his drawings to keep him company?”

The previous battle may have only been an expression of his delight at having visitors. A practical joke, something to throw a little thrill into them. An expression of melancholy—utterly out of character at such a young age—rose to his face.

“Want to come with?” Setsura asked.

The kid practically bounced off the wall and ran away, back the way he came. Back to a world he didn’t have to share with anybody, where he could draw on the walls his whole life long.

“He left,” Pretend Takako said sadly.

“Somebody will come again.”

Setsura pushed the door open. The corridor continued. It was different from what had gone on before. Dusty and moldy, but definitely inside the manor house. A glance behind, and the door had already disappeared. They stood in the middle of the hallway as if they’d been there all along.

“Um—I’m getting down,” said Pretend Takako, blushing slightly.

Setsura squatted down and let her off. “Do you know where this is?” he asked.

“The fourth floor, I think. It’s hardly ever used.”

“Would Kikiou know we escaped?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’d better take our leave. And destroy the place on the way out.”

“How do you plan to do that?”

“The place is already half-burned down. We’ll be sure we get the job done this time.”

“Are you an arsonist?”

“That’s not a nice way to put it. We’re just going to have a little bonfire. Now, where’s the exit?”

“This way.”

Pretend Takako started off down the hall. After a minute, a door appeared. They passed through it and onto a sun-drenched veranda. Descending an elegant staircase brought them to the middle of a verdant forest.

“The mansion wouldn’t have an armory, would it?”

Takako shook her head. “I don’t know. There’s nothing in my memory about dangerous things like that.”

Kikiou would certainly have taken precautions in that department.

“In that case, we’ll have to ask the man himself. Where’s Kikiou’s room?”

“I don’t know that either.”

“That puts us in a bit of a bind.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” came a slightly hoarse male voice above their heads.

“Well, well, well,” Setsura Aki said, as if greeting a customer he hadn’t seen in a long time. He raised his head and looked at the sky.

The large bat wings slowly beat against the air as Yakou hovered a dozen feet off the ground, coolly taking in the two below him.

Chapter Three

The rumbling, exploding sounds came from far away, as the mind-clouded pilots of the hovertanks destroyed themselves over and over again. Wailing sirens mingled with pounding footsteps and motorized carts. The citadel stared into the abyss of its own death throes.

But to one small group of beings, the encircling flames and the unfolding tragedy around them was simply a curious backdrop to a completely different drama.

"As long as she's in your hands, she cannot be in mine." There was a power in General Bey's voice that once shook cities to their foundations. "But now she is in mine and shall never return to yours. We have known each other a long time, Princess. Today is the end of eternity."

"Hoh. Clever man. A lot of sass from a backwoods aristocrat. You'd be nothing but the dirt beneath my feet had I not taken you aboard my ship. This cesspool of a city will be your gravestone."

Princess's eyes blazed with a fire fiercer than the dancing flames. The reverberations rumbled. General Bey closed his eyes. Knowing that her mesmerizing technique had failed, she would find a way to work the failure to her advantage.

In the next moment, her naked body jumped up, soaring with an elegance that would make the most practiced ballerina green with

envy. She twisted her body in midair and landed astride General Bey's broad shoulders before he realized what had happened.

Her willowy hand seized his chin. "Dust you are and to dust shall you return, Kazikli Bey."

She leaned back. In that instant, the pressure exerted on the general's neck must have exceeded a thousand tons. The neck bones cracked and separated. Another mouth appeared below his Adam's apple. Blood showered onto the ground.

General Bey reached up and seized her wrist, even as she pried back with increased force. Blood poured from the mouth and nose of his upturned face.

Thousands of tons of force fell to zero. The general roared in what could be mistaken as his death agonies. But little by little, Princess's interlaced fingers were slipping apart.

"Bitch!"

The curse seemed to add power to his strength. Princess still held on. How long could the Prince of Darkness live with his head torn off—and Princess doing the tearing?

The pair of shadows bounded backwards. General Bey had done a standing high jump off the floor. With a loud groan, the two crashed into the stairwell wall. The fissures snaked out like a smashed daddy longlegs. Unlikely that any pair of humans, past or present, had ever unleashed so much energy in so tight a space.

General Bey did not let the slight slackness in her grip go to waste. He went to push her aside. She was as steady as a rock. The

general got to his feet—it didn't hurt that Princess weighed practically nothing in comparison—and once again slammed the mass of his body against the wall.

Princess gasped. The general concentrated all of his strength into his arms. The two-headed monster came apart. The general roared and spun around, slamming Princess into the ground. This time, the impact produced a short, ear-piercing scream. And a different comeback.

"Not bad, General," she gasped, with a small smile.

He wrapped his left hand around her wrist and reached out with his right toward a concrete wall reduced to rubble by one of the hovertank's laser cannons. A black line stuck out of it. A metal shaft.

He seized the end, twisted and wrenched it free. He smiled with satisfaction. The lasers had sliced the end of the rebar into the shape of a chisel.

"This is the end, Princess." He raised the instrument of death over his head.

"Give it a try! Let's see how well the talents of this royal rube work on me."

"Your history is over!"

A flash of black lightning pierced her sternum just above the white hills of her breasts. Princess's body trembled. Her clenched teeth—like polished grains of rice—opened and a frothy tide of blood poured out.

Takako and Prime Minister Kongodai stood rooted in place. A kind of electric shock briefly passed across their faces. Kongodai dropped the atomic cannon and sat down heavily on his backside. Takako stood there looking on blankly. Though signs of intelligence were beginning to emerge, her eyes remained misted over by Princess's spell.

"Hey, miss, are you all right?" Kongodai asked, rubbing his hands together.

The memory of what had happened since becoming Princess's prisoner was still like a dream, but there was some clarity left. He couldn't know how far along Takako's vampiric transformation was. His reflexive, paternal impulse was that this helpless young woman should not be left here to fend for herself.

He took her by the hand and looked around for the way to the lobby. He spotted a shattered exit sign. "This way. Come along."

He was about to set off, dragging her along if necessary, when a whining turbine sound descended towards them. A large black shadow fell from the fissure in the ceiling, transforming into a hovertank blocking their way.

The pilot was by now quite mad.

The general screwed the iron shaft into Princess deeper and deeper, pinning the woman like a butterfly to a collector's board. Staring down at her comely features writhing in pain, his own face trembled with the ecstatic joys of a strange sexual perversion.

"It is all over for you, Princess," he shouted, like a referee

declaring the victor of a prize fight.

"No. That is yet to come."

Startled, he peered down at the woman's face in her death agonies. And when he understood her meaning, it was too late to pull back. The red glow from Princess's eyes burned through his pupils.

"The only one on his way to destruction is you, General. Come to me."

She shook her hand free and grabbed hold of his hair with a claw-like grip. "It took a lot of pain and suffering to get you to look into these eyes. Now I return it with interest."

Princess drew her right hand down vertically, towards the pole sticking through her chest. The end of the shard buried itself in his wide-open right eye. With a bellow that shook the heavens and the earth, the general tried to pull away, but Princess wouldn't let him.

"Not yet, Bey. It's not yet time for us to part."

She lowered her hand. The shaft dug deeper into his eye socket. A mist of blood erupted from his face. The booming howls echoed against the peals of laughter.

A grotesque scene from one of Dante's inner rings of hell. A bulge appeared on the back of the general's head. Then the tip of the steel spar jutted out.

"How's it feel, General? It's about time you and your pissant aristocracy and your pissant legend were wiped out. It is *my* horrors

the world should speak freely of instead, not yours."

There was even a touch of fondness in her voice. The general tried to throw back his head and tear himself free of her grip. But her eyes burned all the brighter, robbing him of the power to resist.

Would she summon forth yet one more reign of destruction?

But painting a new name in red across the pages of history would have to wait. Princess's expression changed. Lying on her back, her eyes were drawn in the direction of a column of black smoke.

Sensing a slackening in her concentration and strength, the general focused all his power and tore himself free. Righting himself, he yanked the shaft out of his gore-splattered face. Holding a hand over his eye, he jumped back. But not any faster than Princess pushed him away.

Without a backward glance in his direction, her bloody white body plunged into the whirling bands of smoke.

The lines of fire raked the ground on either side of Takako and the prime minister. The 120 mm diameter arrows of fire raised sheets of flame and sent chunks of concrete flying.

"Stop!" Kongodai tried to shout, but the words stuck in his throat. As the onrushing tide of death became inexorable, dumb acceptance was the only human response.

The laser sliced through the floor. Feeling the ground giving way beneath his feet, the prime minister leapt to the right. He intended to take the girl with him, but ran out of time and space.

It seemed that Takako was about to be swallowed up in a rain of falling debris. But then her hair suddenly seemed to stand on end. A white hand reached down and grabbed hold.

Maintaining Takako's balance at the edge of the precipice was a bloody woman. "You're not dying yet," the Demon Princess said in a determined voice. "You are my tool for driving Setsura to despair. No matter what else, I will take you back alive. No matter who else in this world becomes my enemy in the process."

"Who—who the hell are you?"

Prime Minister Kongodai's question was lost in another eruption and implosion from below. He had listened to the SDF Chief of Staff's recordings of General Bey describing the physical and psychological nature of the Demon Princess. But he hadn't believed what he heard.

The wind rising out of the inferno lifted up her glistening black hair, exposing the scorched side of her face. At this critical moment,

Kongodai forgot about everything else and saw only the beauty of her body. The blood covering her face and chest came alive with an obscene elegance, a dash of hot reality interrupting a wet dream.

Her breasts, her hips, those thighs—even with her wounds, the dirt and grime—this physical manifestation of the feminine should be otherwise found only among the divine.

Take this woman to his bed and he would forgo his life and soul. But without a glance at him—a prisoner to his carnal desires—Princess put one arm around Takako and with the other gestured to the hovertank to follow her. She started toward the staircase, then paused and looked back at the prime minister.

Her eyes again glowed with the red light of her irresistible charms. Japan's chief executive couldn't close his eyes. "A different cut of cloth from the kings I once made my slaves, but you may prove useful. Until my fires no longer smolder in your heart, you will serve me. Wherever I am, when I beckon, you will come at once. Now go."

The weight of her words seemed to bow him backwards. In the next moment, he returned to his senses and ran to the front lobby.

"As long as these eyes stand sentry, death will stay its hand. Create an exit so we can leave this stage and be on our way."

She turned her lovely countenance up at the ceiling. The hovertank shifted its position and pointed upwards. A crimson beam incinerated the ceiling. The walls shattered like a bamboo screen. Fire and concrete showered down, the dull booms drowned out by the shrieking echoes of Princess's laughter.

Ryuuki watched in casual surprise as the towering building—once called a monument to human folly—toppled over. The one-armed man stood calmly on the overpass that ran past the Park Hyatt Hotel as the flying embers fell around him.

Then he walked on, looking for all the world like a man out for a stroll, as if the flames themselves were determined not to touch him.

"Yet another decline and fall." The scene of destruction reflected in his eyes, eyes that focused instead on the far away and long ago. "The citadels of the Hun and all their outposts fell in flames too. It is the same everywhere. The world is born to be destroyed."

His voice was carried away on the wind, a wind born of the building's downfall. Repeated earth tremors shook the road. Towers of writhing flames rose up like fire-breathing dragons. Light and shadow played across his face.

He raised his hand as if to brush aside the darkness. Twenty yards ahead of him, a trio of shadows faced him on the road.

The large hemispherical object like a turtle's shell hovered motionless in the air, along with a smaller pod-shaped cylinder. Commanding him to come with all due haste was one of the two willowy silhouettes standing between them.

Part Three: The Circle of Life and Death

Chapter One

Yakou floated there in the air. “You broke your promise,” he said, a frown rising to his refined face. He meant Setsura promising to stay out of sight until Princess returned.

The object of his accusation scratched his head. “Well, not on *purpose*.” He showed no sign of being rattled in the least.

“You do know that this is no joking matter?”

“Oh, don’t start saying things like that.”

“Prepare yourself for the possibility that when Princess returns with Takako, she will crush her like an insect.”

“You intend to play the tattletale?”

“You are hardly in a position to complain.”

“True.”

“There remains inside my heart a remnant of the fellowship you and I once shared. A foolish and utterly ridiculous thing, but I cannot ignore it. That may be why I believed your promise to keep quiet and stay still.”

On the ground below, Setsura betrayed no sign whether he caught the touch of mortification in Yakou’s voice. When God talked to mortals, it may have been something like this.

“However, you defied my wishes. Kikiou was absolutely sure you

could not escape, but he should come running any minute. It needn't come to that. Here and now I will sing your requiem."

"That's an awfully confident statement."

Setsura sauntered to a stop. More than the thought of making a friend of Yakou, keeping things relaxed at this stage of the game seemed the right way to proceed.

"Everybody makes mistakes. The important thing is that we don't repeat them. A little something to keep in mind."

"You are too laid back for your own good."

"I was born that way, I guess. But if the shoe fits, might as well wear it. Your eyes need to be opened as well. Then we can call it even."

Yakou had released Setsura from the clam's nightmare by blowing on the flute. His wings beat against the air. Setsura's eyes glimmered, sensing his approach. In that instant, Yakou soared higher.

Pretend Takako screamed as Setsura shoved her aside. That *something* flew through the air, was severed without a sound, and disappeared.

"As I should have expected. My three-pronged attack. Good parry." Yakou's voice came from high above, trembling with excitement.

"No problem." Setsura smiled and raised his hand. Like two friends out for a friendly game of golf.

“The next one won’t be so easy. When it comes to restoring lost confidence, there’s no making the same mistake twice.”

“You’re really trying to kiss up to her, aren’t you? A real man might find that a bit embarrassing.”

“You know nothing of her true magnificence,” Yakou said, almost ecstatically. “Share her bed once and you shall see—the true meaning of Shangri-la.”

“Ask that doctor who lives in the old ward government building,” Setsura said airily.

“He doesn’t know the half of true human pleasures,” Yakou smirked. “Either way, he will soon be one of us as well. His charms will be ours for the studying. Why don’t you come along too?”

“Sounds like you’re making up for past mistakes,” goaded Setsura, in words that didn’t sound like it at all. “If you don’t wrap things up before Kikiou arrives, there will be a lot of explaining to do. Besides, I’ve got places to go and things to do.”

“What would those be?”

“To make an honest man—no, a good grandson—out of you. Where there’s a will there’s a way.”

“You mean the moon lilies? Do you even know how?”

“Ah. Steep for thirty minutes in boiling water. Or something like that.”

He wasn’t joking, but the way he said it, it came out that way. Yakou’s smile was equally unruffled.

“I should be getting a move on, if I say so myself. But first, could you tell me what became of Kanan-san afterwards?”

“Does that concern you?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Princess should be returning with her even now.”

“Running a little behind schedule, isn’t she?”

Yakou hesitated. From the unexpected reaction on his face, Setsura had exposed a chink in Yakou’s armor.

“So something’s come up. General Bey or another one of your bothersome intruders?”

Yakou didn’t answer. He instead flexed his fingers. Before the cracking of his knuckles reached him, Setsura had dashed to the right, diving headfirst into a hedge of thick green undergrowth. While still in midair he carved out a round hole with the scythe of his devil wire, and at the same time he landed, another hole burrowed into the ground.

That same hand reached skyward.

Yakou dodged the howling mass of devil wires and plummeted downwards, folding his wings at the last second to slip through the entangling mesh. The web reversed direction in pursuit. Just as it reached him, Yakou pushed out both hands.

Setsura, though, didn’t try to cut through the demon *qi* that had shattered Kikiou into pieces. Ten feet in front of him, the *qi* dove into the ground and seemed to vanish. It passed by him and was

absorbed into the side of the manor house.

Setsura stopped and said, “What are you up to?” Yakou was hurling *qi* at a place directly below him.

That they would make the time in the midst of this life and death struggle for such a Q&A meant that Yakou had not fundamentally lost his old self. It was, of course, part and parcel of Setsura’s personality.

“I could ask the same of you. Do you wish the evening bell to toll thrice for thee?”

“Meaning what?”

“An old English proverb. When evening came, the country churches would ring their bells twice to mark the time of day. Children playing in the fields would take it as a cue to return home. But sometimes children would stray too far and get lost. In that case, a third bell would chime.”

“That’s a nice story.”

“Not really. A child who heard the third bell was sure to return home the wrong way and disappear. Fall from a cliff or drown in a bog. That’s the origin of the third bell.”

“You calling me a liar? Just because you did a little study abroad in England doesn’t mean you go lording it over everybody.” Even when dissing someone, he did it in a cheerful manner.

“Anyway—” Yakou grinned, signaling a resumption of combat. Setsura relaxed his body.

A moment later, the growl of a wild animal interrupted their contest.

“Hey, look at that,” Setsura said.

Kikiou came around the corner of the manor house. He wasn’t alone. A fierce-looking eagle-like bird perched on his right shoulder. To his left was an attractive young woman.

“Stay out of this, Kikiou,” Yakou warned.

“Who do you think you are talking to?” Kikiou cast a disparaging look at the airborne young man. “He has caused us nothing but trouble. He broke into Princess’s mausoleum and destroyed her casket. It does not matter that it was a fake. She could not fault us for ending his life. The one who shouldn’t be interfering is you, Yakou.”

“He could destroy this world for all I care, as long as it is in accordance with Princess’s wishes. You are the traitor to her desires. Don’t forget that.”

The cool stare accompanying the equally cool voice brought an unpleasant look to Kikiou’s face. Forced to play second fiddle to Yakou was reason enough to loathe him.

And Yakou as well had good reasons to give Kikiou a wide berth. He’d awoken Setsura from the dream behind Kikiou’s back. And even if the fault lay with Kikiou to start with, making an enemy of him in this world was hardly a wise strategy. Win a battle of *qi* and the warlock could resurrect a new body from the severed head alone.

And he wasn’t likely to make the same mistake twice. If they ever

re-engaged, the only thing Yakou could be sure of was him pulling a trick out of his wizardly hat he'd never seen before. Considering that he had the run of his home ground, he could easily deliver a series of jabs that would add up to real damage after a while.

"So, how do you two wish to proceed?" Setsura asked, as if they weren't the enemies they clearly were. "If you can't get your stories straight, you're not going to put together much of a coherent strategy. All to my benefit, I guess. Do we respect our elders or rely on the opinions of youth to show us the way? Well, either way, hurry up."

Yakou looked at Kikiou. Kikiou looked at Yakou. Each pair of eyes filled with raw disdain for the other. His nonchalant manner and the sarcasm in his voice only made Setsura's words all the more effective. When it came to fanning the flames without moving a finger, he was the king of what-the-hell.

"I will yield," Yakou quickly offered. "I am content as the understudy. Let us watch you finish off Setsura, Sir Kikiou."

He gave a little extra emphasis to that sir, tempting Kikiou to go ahead and make his day. With Kikiou and Setsura both showing their hands, he could stand on the sidelines and pick off the pieces afterwards.

The expression on the *senbei* shop owner's face said, "Huh?" He was clearly taken aback. Kikiou saw where this was going as well. The icy flash in his eyes he directed at Yakou could freeze blood. But when it came to dealing with Setsura, he couldn't very well be standing in line.

The towering fury spilling from his frame turned on Setsura, and sent forth—the pretty young lady. She was wearing a *cheongsam* slit to the waist. The fabric glittered like a kaleidoscope.

The fine figure of a man, his wings spread against the blue sky—the gorgeous flowers of the pretty young woman—the black-clad young man planted on the earth—all against the backdrop of the smoky-green forest and the vivid primary colors of the old manor house. The visual beauty of the scene might have otherwise sprung forth from a mural or scroll of some alien world.

And how would this woman tear apart the composition?

"Take a good look, Setsura. This woman's skills will make your lover die with jealousy."

Setsura reacted to the threat with a brief, disbelieving look, a cat being rudely roused from a nap. "Forgive the correction, but if you are referring to a certain physician, I truly think not."

Kikiou didn't respond. The woman alone moved. Inclining her body slightly and turning to the left, her resplendent thigh emerged from the slit.

Its shape and muscularity were perfect in artistic and physical terms. Its alluring and captivating presence could not help but arouse the sexual impulses, as if the thigh had condensed out of a moist miasma and poured forth from beneath her dress.

Setsura looked on with blank bewilderment. Any other reaction would be perfectly unnatural.

The woman next reached up to the back of her collar. The dress

split open. No sooner had her white chest and full décolletage appeared above the folds of the material than she pushed it further down her body.

The sensuous movements of her hands conducting a symphony of the erotic. Checking Setsura's reaction with upturned eyes, she gradually pressed her hands lower.

The fruit had been at some point stained with the glistening secretions of the vine. Her pink nipples appeared, and Setsura's eyes were drawn to the glistening protuberances. Her mannerisms and body would have aroused a stone statue.

The slightest thought of the fantasies such licentiousness must inspire made the focus of his attention perfectly comprehensible. And his unemotional gaze all the more remarkable.

The dress fell and gathered around her ankles. She pressed her hands to her breasts and her privates. The display of bashfulness in her gaze was itself bewitching, the pose enticing. Her breasts spilled out from her palms as she slowly turned her back to him, displaying her hips.

The sunlight played across the gentle curves. She shook them slightly.

The big bird perched on Kikiou's shoulders shook as well. It was getting turned on, too. A bird getting the hots for a human was hardly the norm, but that was how invigorating this woman's sexuality was.

Setsura blinked. "Quite the little hussy," he said.

“Before coming to this city, I studied all of your ways. Especially when it comes to women, you’re not exactly a lady’s man. Not exactly indifferent. Or rather, not evincing the normal reactions. But how shall I describe a man who, despite his willingness to indulge himself now and then beyond the bounds of ordinary convention, has never once shared the delights of a woman a hundred times more experienced?”

“Well—”

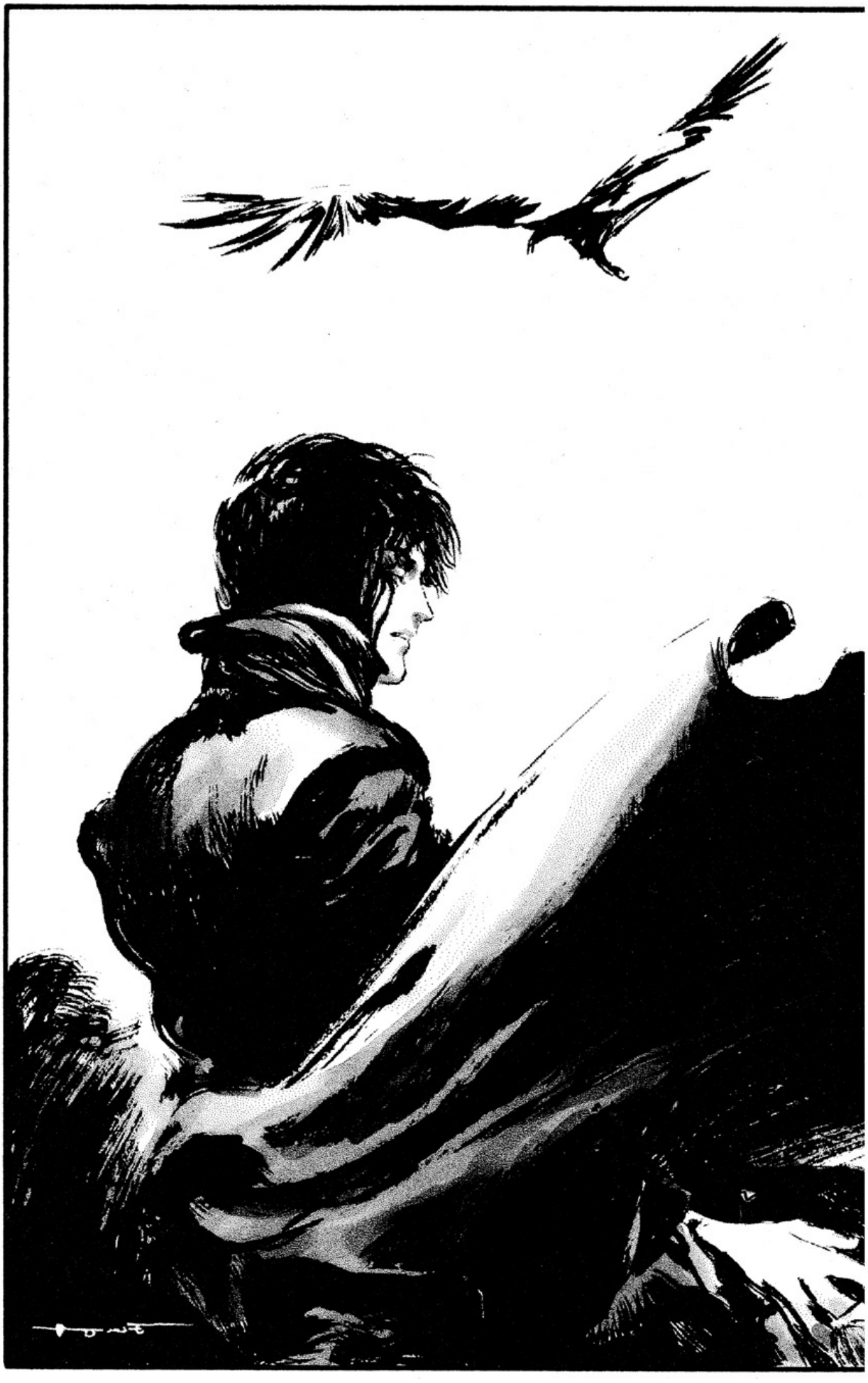
“The results speak for themselves. During the First Emperor period of the Qin Dynasty, I created an artificial concubine and brought her forth like this. Quite the beauty, don’t you think? Look on her long and even a man like me gets to feeling funny. Before it’s too late—get him!”

She moved forward with a step-like gait. Her lips gleamed. From her mouth puffed out flashes of light like dandelion seeds. At Setsura’s head. Tiny needles like blow darts. He flicked his face to the side.

Her thigh filled his vision. Had he been a hundredth of a second slower, his cheek would have been studded with silver and blood.

Setsura jumped backwards before another wave of light came at him. While he was still in the air, a red line circumscribed her head. Without the slightest indication of pain on her features, it fell to the ground.

No blood flowed. The severed edges were a pale peach color.



Her two hands reached out. And severed at the joints. The trunk separated from the thighs and landed on the arms. The legs stood there splayed at odd angles.

“Go!”

Together with the sound of his voice, the flapping of wings arose from Kikiou’s shoulders.

Lying on the ground, Setsura released the killing devil wires at the onrushing bird. Just before making its strike, something warm and soft splashed against his hand. The bird’s steel beak had slit his forehead.

The bird swooped above with room to spare. Setsura got to his feet. The blood flowing from the wound painted half of his face red. He turned his open eye, not toward the bird, but toward Kikiou.

The old man tugged at his white beard. “It is pointless, but give it a try.”

Setsura released two strands of devil wire. One closed on Kikiou from the sky, the other from the ground, aiming to draw and quarter him, up and down, left and right.

The vectors of the wires suddenly tangled. A burst of colorless, odorless energy from Kikiou’s body vaporized them as easily as strands of cotton thread.

A strange feeling gripped Setsura’s blood-stained body.

The wet lips trailing along the nape of his neck, the groping hand around his chest and the thighs entwining his legs, the ass pressing

against his waist—unmistakably those of that voluptuous woman.

Chapter Two

"Do you understand the meaning of *my* concubine?" Kikiou demanded in a loud voice. "She conquers and combines. A body made for the bewitching of men. Spend one night with her, and the most virile man alive would be drained dry as a mummy. Not only that. See her naked body once, and even if flesh never touches flesh, you will feel her everywhere. How is it? Has she pressed her lips against yours? Does her tongue lave the skin?"

Setsura didn't answer. Perhaps he couldn't. His eyes stared off into the distance, but couldn't disguise the raw emotions roiling inside. If Kikiou was telling the truth, he would now be reaching the heights of sexual union.

A large shadow descended. Despite the raptor's swooping descent, setting him up for the certain kill, Setsura was moving all too sluggishly. The two shadows merged together. A scream erupted, followed by a splash of blood.

Kikiou shouted—not because of the bird's severed head. This was a woman's scream. The bird's talons sank into Pretend Takako's neck.

With a roar of anger, he was about to unleash a bolt of *qi* when a writhing wing obscured his vision. A slight delay as the mysterious energy disintegrated it, and Setsura and Pretend Takako had vanished.

“Where did they go?” he screamed at Yakou in the air above him.

The young scion only shrugged. “The barriers are in place. They can’t have gone far.”

Kikiou ground his teeth and set off running. That secret source of power propelled him forward, bounding a dozen feet at a time. As he landed, another kind of energy came at him from another direction.

“Bastard!”

Feeling his legs twisting off beneath him, he knew the source of the blast was Yakou.

“Sorry about that! I planted those land mines for Setsura, but it looks like my timing was off.” High in the sky, the winged man laughed.

In a grove of trees a hundred yards from the manor house, Setsura laid Pretend Takako on the ground. Her head was no longer bleeding as badly, but only because her face was drained to a waxy complexion. The bird’s claws and beak had torn at her arteries and punctured her heart.

“Finally—” Pretend Takako gasped. “I was finally able to return the favor. If it were possible—I would want—want to become the real—me—”

Setsura clasped her white, cold hand. With her other hand, she touched the comely countenance looking down at her. “Covered with blood—and yet so beautiful—you wear it well—I only wish—I could have met you sooner—”

The light dimmed in her eyes. That certain *something* disappeared from her pupils, and all that was left was Setsura's face reflected in their black depths. Setsura bowed his head, as if saying a prayer for the dead. Above him came the sound of wings.

"Nice escape."

Even when Yakou alit silently upon the ground, Setsura didn't raise his head.

"The powers of the concubine are such that, if she doesn't touch the skin, it should disappear away after a night. A regular person would be desiccated in that time. But you'll hold up. How did you kill that raptor? Can you wield your devil wire yet?"

Yakou hadn't noticed the devil wires that'd flown from the underbrush with split-second timing. No need to say these hidden weapons were originally intended for him.

"You're not Kikiou?" said Setsura, his head still bowed.

The expression froze on Yakou's face. This was Setsura's voice and Setsura's form. And yet somehow different. From the outside looking in, he had changed only from the inside looking out.

"But I've no objection to you either." Setsura slowly raised his head. "So now you have met the real *me*."

Yakou stiffened. With a single rustle of his wings, he could sense that all the possible ways of escaping the web of devil wires were blocked by the dreadful presence of the suddenly transformed Setsura's being.

“Shall we get down to it?” the beautiful voice asked, as if from far away.

“If I say no, shall we leave it be?” An unusual proposition for him. A spur-of-the-moment decision.

“No.”

A quiet, cool reply that made his hair stand on end and sent a cold steel hand down his back.

“Does it have to come down to you and me?”

“Where is Kikiou?”

“He was over there, catching his breath, arms and legs scattered hither and yon.”

“Why is that?”

“It seems that somebody left dangerous explosives just lying about. As they say, close does count when it comes to hand grenades.”

“Meaning that he will be tying up his own loose ends and not settling matters here.”

“So I would imagine. If you proceed back down the same path from which you emerged earlier and head west, after five minutes or so you should find a staircase leading underground. Descend it and continue west. You will understand what to do when you get there.”

“I have one other request.”

“What is that?”

“Last rites for this woman. Even a shallow grave would suffice. That should not be difficult with your *qi*.”

“I am agreeable. However, it is my duty to quarantine you as well.”

“Do you want to try?”

“No. Not for now. Not until I can see through the man you are now.”

On that note, Setsura emerged from the grove of trees and set off toward the manor house.

Blocking Princess’s path was that same silver pod, the compact armored personnel carrier belonging to Lieutenant Matthews of JGSDF Special Forces Operational Detachment F. Floating a yard above the road, it turned its cold magnetic eye towards them.

“So we meet again. I won’t tell you to leave this time. Persistently appearing before me again and again bespeaks a death wish. Come.”

She raised her right hand and gestured to the pod.

Her eyes cast a glow with that bewitching light—which unexpectedly faded. Her left hand was clasped around her upper right arm. Dark red oozed from between the fingers, dripping down onto her glistening stomach.

“That fucking Bey, he cursed me somehow. Or I expended too much energy. Or there’s just something about his nature.”

She slumped forward. An electronic voice said, “You’re

obviously in a bad way. Not even the greatest vampire is truly immortal. How about you let us handle things?" Princess's wounds and blood loss gave Matthews a shot of confidence. "Right now, outside the city, preparations are underway to receive you. It's too bad about the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex, but a little hike to the tax rate and they'll have that hole filled in, pronto. Come along. We'll patch you up too."

"Patch me up? Your filthy fingers touching my skin? The flies swarming on a corpse would be a more lovable lot."

"Some things can't be helped. I know you weren't eager the first time we met, but you've got to be hurting now. This APC pod of mine is brand new. Like a vampire princess, she can take a licking and keep on ticking."

"Like me?" All expression vanished from her face. "Do it!"

Arrows of blood red light hit the surface of the pod, bouncing at odd angles up into the sky. The pint-sized APC had repelled the 120 mm laser cannon of the hovertank, three times its size.

Lying on the reclining chair inside the pod, Matthews gritted his teeth.

The day before, he'd returned to headquarters and commandeered the latest and greatest in the product line, a testament to the pull that Special Forces Operational Detachment F had.

This new model had three times the armor capability of the previous one and twice the firepower. It was slightly larger, but overall mobility had only been sacrificed by half a percent. This was

but one of many reasons the Defense Ministry's Technology Corps now lorded its capabilities over America's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and Russia's Military Engineering Technical University.

The pod's monitors provided a 180-degree external panoramic view. The large frame of the hovertank currently occupied most of it. Its obvious strategy was to throw off the pod's navigation using its sheer weight and the strength of its magnetic field.

"Piece of junk," Matthews sneered, taking hold of the joystick in his right hand, through which he had access to all of the system controls.

The pod retreated before the magnetic field could touch it. The hovertank's laser lit up against the night sky. The pod's surface consisted of four layers of quarter-millimeter heat-resistant paint. The top layer could last seven seconds exposed to 600 thousand degrees. Five seconds for each of the next two, three seconds for the fourth. The heat-resistant ceramic armor underneath would last ten seconds.

A small glowing dot alit like a firefly on the body of the hovertank. No sooner had it made contact than a million-degree jet of plasma traveling at eight thousand yards a second punched through the 20 mm titanium skin, turning the inside of the vehicle into an incandescent hell, instantly killing the pilot.

A new fire blossom bloomed on the highway overpass. The strange creature ate itself alive, bright blazing blood oozing from seams in the armor, melting through the road's surface and falling

like dripping wax to the streets below.

Seconds later, a thunderclap exploded upwards from the abyss. Moving forward while effortlessly dodging the falling embers, Ryuuki came to a halt. The flames illuminated his fearless visage. A different emotion colored his face. Surprise.

Princess stood ten feet in front of him, directly confronting the cylindrical pod that had destroyed the hovertank. Her presence communicated not so much an intent to fight as to protect. Takako was behind her. That was who she was protecting.

The pod silently advanced on the two. “Why not come with?” said Matthews, a note of triumphalism in his voice. “Or shall we resort to drastic measures?”

“You should take that up with *him*.”

The unusual reply prompted Matthews to check out the man in the right-hand corner of his monitor. One look at the big, long-haired, one-armed man in Chinese dress told him who he was.

“Your lover boy?” he spat out.

It didn’t matter. No living thing could defeat him here. The fierce warrior spirit of a soldier, together with his unrivaled armaments and weaponry, bestowed upon him an exaggerated sense of pride.

“Well, then. I’ll settle things with him first. Watch how I do it and you’ll be licking my feet and begging for your life.”

The nose of the pod itself seemed to scowl as it turned to Ryuuki.

“Settle it, Ryuuki.” Princess smiled thinly. It was impossible to

tell whether it was the pod or Ryuuki she held in so little regard. "But take your time. This man takes me for granted. I want him to feel the terror down to the marrow of his bones."

"I understand." Ryuuki nodded as a strange smile rose to his lips.

Thoughts of battle stirred this old general's blood. Or perhaps it was the unearthly presence of a beautiful princess. Matthews witnessed it as well—and felt a sense of dread more than his own anger.

He pushed the pod forward, concentrating the magnetic field at Ryuuki's feet. Chunks of concrete and the figure of a man sprang up as if propelled by hidden springs. They sailed over the guardrail and were swallowed up by the darkness below. Matthews once again turned his attention to Princess.

He readied the tranquilizer gun. The gas-propelled round contained a powerful drug and auto-injector, and would act instantaneously upon reaching its target. In theory, it could take down a ten-ton elephant in a second, with no side effects except pleasant dreams.

And if the target was protected by a shell or carapace, the chemical would vaporize and be absorbed by the skin and lungs.

"Overkill for humans, but we're talking monsters here. Should be just the right dose."

The dart struck the right shoulder of the Demon Princess. She curiously eyed the hypodermic, slimmer than a sewing needle. And pulled it out. Matthews felt the surprise like an electric shock. An

anesthetic that could put a dinosaur to sleep wasn't effective on her?

"You don't think I've ever played with such piddling drugs before?" Her face filled the screen. "Every time I appear on the stage, the witch doctors and the scientists leave no stone unturned. How many times do you think thunder has rained down from heaven upon me? How many times do you think I have been attacked by invisible beasts? They even injected poison directly into my precious veins. What effect do you think this weak tea could possibly have?"

Her hands dissolved into a blur. With a snap of her wrist, the hypodermic returned on the path it had come, smashing into the electronic eye.

"Fucking bitch," Matthews cursed. The monitor temporarily went black, before switching over to three-dimensional radar imaging. "Enough of this shit."

In response to the trigger on his joystick, one of three tubes in the internal missile bay shifted to the launcher. This particular one had a red label, indicating its nuclear payload.

The images of familiar faces flashed through his mind, the faces of his men—Cardinal, Kendall, Meguid, Chan—they ate the same MREs, drank the same swill, traded jokes as easily as blows.

"Sorry about the wait, guys. Now we settle accounts."

So as not to get caught up in the nuclear fires, he was moving the pod back toward the Park Hyatt Hotel when a strange force ran through it. A blackness engulfed him. Everything stopped. The pod's power packs plummeted to zero. Even the sense of strangeness was

foreign to him. This wasn't simply mechanical failure.

Princess gazed at the big man standing at the side of the road with an air of satisfaction. "Covered with mire and you still pull through, General Ryuuki."

"Much appreciated." Ryuuki bowed his head, the picture of the perfect servant.

"And is that Shuuran flitting about? Hoh. She threw herself at insignificant men her whole life, and can't stop doing it when she's been reduced to dust. Don't either of you miss being on that boat? How about it, Ryuuki?"

"Wherever I am, I will come when Princess beckons." His voice seemed to soak into the earth. His own self that could be mistaken for the dark of the night.

"Exactly. You and Shuuran and all those who have received my kiss. Your new life, down to the last drop of your blood, is consecrated to me. If I beckon, you come. If I tell you to fuck, you fuck. If I tell you to kill, you kill."

The Demon Princess staggered. Before she could fall, Ryuuki was there to catch her. He saw the wound in her chest. "Who did this?"

"That bastard Bey."

"I understand. And where is he now?"

"I don't know. He lost an eye and ran away. Track him down and kill him."

“If that is your wish.”

“And what is your wish?”

Ryuuki did not answer.

“So you do not act unless I command. Fine. I know you have cast me aside. I have watched you wandering the precincts of this wretched city, drinking the blood of its inhabitants. But I left you alone. Because I knew you would come when I called you, regardless of your will. What will you do now, Ryuuki?”

“Well—”

“How does a creature with no will exercise his will? I’m curious. Let’s put it to the test, if you so choose. Destroy me and you just may gain your freedom.”

What other empress would encourage her servant to regicide?

“Surely the thought has crossed your mind. What do you say?”

“If it pleases you.”

“Then do as you please.” It took a long moment for the look of surprise to rise to Ryuuki’s features. “What are you waiting for? I told you to suit yourself. Keeping in mind, however, that you’ll never know when I will call you home.”

Another long moment, and Ryuuki responded to her icy smile. “May I ask you something?”

“What is that?”

“What do you intend to do with that woman?”

“I’ll show her to Setsura. And he will follow me. As my servant.”

“He is presently in our kingdom?”

“Nothing gets past you.”

“But Princess, why did you save her?”

“You already asked that question.”

“Setsura is being held in our kingdom?”

“Precisely.”

“So you let an interloper live, and in order to get that man to follow you, saved this woman from yet another enemy. Princess, perhaps—”

The thought that drifted through his brain was the same one that had occurred to General Bey. And as with General Bey, it made no sense to him either. What the two demons could not bring themselves to articulate was simply too incredible to imagine. *Impossible*.

“I’m going,” she said breezily. “You do whatever.”

She had started down the road when her eyes fell upon the most beautiful figure in the world, standing just behind Ryuuki. He was lovelier than the moon. It seemed to dim in his presence. With his white cape wrapped around him like a white mist, there was no need for him to introduce himself.

Doctor Mephisto said, “Once before, journeying to your kingdom, I saw you passing through the night.”

The Demon City Physician and the eternal, indestructible Demon Princess had finally come face to face.

Chapter Three

"I have heard your name bandied about, Mephisto," Princess coolly responded. "What did you come here to do?" She didn't beat around the bush. "If this is about your lover, he's at my place. And I won't be letting him go for the time being."

"I am presuming that *the time being* can last a long time in your case."

Mephisto silently drew closer, a winter sculpture passing through a summer night.

"Why are you here?"

Ryuuki's question brought him to a halt. "I followed a man with two hairs from a doll embedded in his body. I had the feeling I would find someone to lead me deeper into understanding."

"Deeper into understanding?" Princess asked, noting that Doctor Mephisto hadn't given his one-time patient—Takako—even a passing glance.

"Namely—" Mephisto's lips slowly curled into a smile. And as his mouth turned up, the two fangs naturally appeared.

Perhaps having already sensed it, Princess didn't appear surprised. She looked at Ryuuki. "That makes you the servant of my servant. Can you tolerate being in such a position?"

"I have no choice but to try and measure the results," Mephisto

calmly answered. “Whether or not I am a man who can be addressed so and hold his tongue. Once the question is answered, let us repair to your kingdom.”

“But of course. In pursuit of greater knowledge. How interesting.”

Princess smiled. She made no effort to cover her naked breasts and sex. And yet what could be clearly seen impressed upon the mind both a sense of innate dignity and some species of hair-raising dread. Perhaps this was only what four thousand years of living could do.

An uninhibited sense of life spilled from her unclothed body. Call her the literal living dead, but could such a body be found anywhere else in this world?

“Ryuuki, you are this man’s lord,” said the peerless beauty. She glided up to Mephisto. The pale white woman took the pale white man by the hand. “A doctor who heals a woman with a mere touch. Well, then. Call me your patient.”

She guided Mephisto’s hand over the hills of her perfect bosom. The fingers sank into the soft flesh. The dented flesh suddenly sprang back as his fingers melted deeper into her breast. The Demon Princess smiled.

“This is your treatment,” Doctor Mephisto said, like an artist whispering to the night. “You have blood vessels, but only a steel blue darkness flows through them. You have a pulse, but a heart that beats but thrice a year. As for the old legends of the vampire—if I tore out your heart, how would you fare?”

“Don’t let me stop you,” Princess said. The words were directed to Ryuuki. Her eyes rested on Mephisto. “Try and see, my Pale Physician.”

Mephisto’s right hand sank in deeper. If only briefly, time stopped. In only a moment, he would withdraw that hand. In that moment, a bright red spark bloomed between them.

Mephisto’s hand spouted blood. The blood splashed across his cape and covered the rest of Princess’s unstained skin.

“That’s enough,” Ryuuki growled, his voice teeming with an untamed ferocity.

“I don’t mind. Proceed with the treatment,” she commanded, and again took hold of the doctor’s hand. “Let him try and release me from the fate of drinking blood.”

As the two hands moved down her body, toward the dark triangle between her legs, an unseen energy penetrated them.

“I cannot permit any interference with the treatment, even from one who drank my blood.”

“Princess may not be touched.” Ryuuki’s hand circled behind his back. “Stand down, Demon Physician.”

Among vampires, those who drank blood reigned over those whose blood was drunk. Following this rule, Mephisto could not act against Ryuuki’s wishes. And Mephisto did in fact take a step back. And was just as quickly pulled back.

“You are a shame to your sex, General Ryuuki. A pretty face—a

flirtatious trollop making eyes at you—and your soul is theirs for the taking. Better you spend the rest of eternity up to your neck in the soft, unpleasant flesh."

Mephisto buried his hands inside his cape. His white hands appeared again like an actor brushing aside the curtains on the stage. Ryuuki waited for the curtains to stir before launching his demon *qi*. Some old devotion to dead notions of chivalry and "playing fair" on the battlefield, and Mephisto no doubt saw it coming.

He produced from under his cape a small brown vial. Beads the same brown color glittered in the moonlight as they fell next to Ryuuki's feet. The beads at the fore leapt—quite unnaturally, as if possessed of a will of their own—onto Ryuuki's ankles.

A second later, Ryuuki wordlessly writhed in agony. A fierce electric shock coursed up his body from his ankles into his brain. His hair stood on end, his eyes rolled back in their sockets. Blue smoke trailed from his nose and ears. It didn't end there. Other beads landed on his thighs and waist. Ryuuki spasmed each time.

"Crystal lattices were discovered in the Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza. A kind of biochip into which the health status of the inhabitants could be inputted. They had already discovered the integrated circuit, perhaps. Inside the lattice were beads of a different color. That's what these are."

It could have been a kind of security mechanism designed to protect information about the patient. And as soon as it detected an intrusion, it would deliver a deadly electric shock. In order to accomplish this, the inside of the crystal was coated with an

insulating material and embedded with an instant-on power source the likes of which remained in development elsewhere.

"I just managed to complete the controls allowing targeted search and destroy, but it has finally come in handy. One bead, one attack. I would be interested in seeing how much a vampire's body can withstand."

Mephisto's dispassionate voice made Ryuuki shudder as the crystal spheres spilled out one after the other. The felonious Demon Physician and the beautiful Princess—Ryuuki's ostensible master—observed his suffering with a kind of glee that was truly macabre.

When the last crystal beads dropped onto the roadway, Ryuuki's convulsions came to twenty. Smoke wafted from his body as he struggled to his feet.

"Splendid!" Mephisto honestly praised him, though it could hardly be taken as such. "An impressive revival. You should last a million more years. Who came up with this nonsense about driving a stake through the heart to kill you?" He spoke with a voice like a silver bell.

Ryuuki raised his hand. Could the *qi* of a vampire fell another vampire?

"That's enough." In response to Princess's command, the general grew still. "I have only just met him, this man bitten by Ryuuki and yet able to defy him. Wonderful. You must come with me to my kingdom. And meet Setsura Aki there. Your lover and the man who will be my servant."

“I am afraid not, Princess,” a melancholic aura cloaked Ryuuki’s words.

“Why is that?” Annoyance flickered across Princess’s face. Ryuuki’s objection was unpardonable.

“The man called Setsura Aki will never be Princess’s servant. He will never be a slave to any being. There are some things in this city that even blood and life cursed by four thousand years of experience cannot accomplish.”

“Perhaps.” She smiled. “If that is what is fated to be, then so be it. I am interested only in scorning and seducing him. He will never be my slave? It is all the same to me. In return, he will taste the fires of hell until he begs for his last breath.”

“Neither is that something you can accomplish the way you are now.”

“What are you saying?” The eyes of the Demon Princess cast off a crimson glow. The eyes that had given out in front of the compact armored personnel carrier.

“Princess, why do you insist on covering for that girl? In order to present her to Setsura? Never in two thousand years have you shown such sympathy for another person—not until he kindled it inside you. You cannot subjugate the person who brought about such a change within you.”

“You fool!”

Princess’s angry voice was right in front of his face. Even Doctor Mephisto hadn’t seen her move. With a sweep of her slender hand,

she toppled Ryuuki over. Blood spurted from his throat.

"You surely know the pain that my hand can deliver. That will not heal for now. You will not sleep well. Suffer. Suffer. Suffer alone. No, suffer along with Shuuran's dust."

The stark-naked demoness beckoned to Takako. "Let's be on our way. It is time to look into Setsura Aki's hell."

Mayor Kajiwara watched the fires of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex from a room in the ward government building. He didn't know for certain who was at the bottom of it, but couldn't help gloating a bit at the spectacle. They couldn't dispatch the fire trucks at this time of night. The inferno would have to burn itself out.

Among the buildings that had existed since before he took office, these were held in unique regard. Still, though he dreamed of them falling every night, seeing the real thing reported on the mass media was a hell of a surprise.

There was no saying whether this made him a good or bad person, but Kajiwara communicated the sense of someone who took it all in stride, who didn't worry his head over every little thing.

At least on this night—that wasn't the case.

Kajiwara was vexed down to the soles of his shoes. The most direct cause was the nuking of the Toyama housing project. As was to be expected, outside forces—likely the Defense Agency—had sent in a team to exterminate the vampires. Kajiwara had anticipated such a move, and set up an ambush. But he never imagined they'd go

nuclear on him. The whole project was a wasteland. The Department of Health was running around setting up radiation shields and blood transfusion stations.

Ally and enemy alike had been wiped out. The police had lost a hundred good men minimum.

He'd promptly filed a protest with the Ministry of Defense, and things were now in negotiations. The perpetrators feigned innocence, but at the end of the day, he'd make sure that generous expressions of sympathy would flow to the bereaved families. And after that, compensation to the ward and Toyama property owners.

But that would hardly be the end of it.

The mortification ate away at Kajiwara. There were citizens of this city he hadn't been able to protect. And what good did money do the dead? And how to track down the relatives of the Toyama residents? Touch bases unofficially with representatives from each country and have them contacted on the sly? For starters, perhaps.

At any rate, he'd gotten off the phone with Beijing only a few hours ago. He was less sure what to make of the conflagration engulfing the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex.

The small sense of satisfaction Kajiwara was feeling was only natural. Though the Department of Tourism was sure to raise a stink over losing such a prominent sightseeing landmark.

He thought he could hear the engines of firefighting helicopters winding up, but it turned out to be a chime.

His secretary had already gone home. Kajiwara snugged up his tie

and sat down behind the desk. He toggled the control panel and turned on the outside monitor. Chief Hayase of the General Administration Division was there with Kotani, his subordinate. Plus Yoshie Dodai from General Affairs.

"What's up?"

"There's something we wish to discuss with you in a secure setting," the straight-shooting Hayase said. If he said it, then it very likely was so. The other two bowed their heads.

After a moment's thought, Kajiwara gave the okay. "Come in."

He opened the outer door and unlocked the inner door. The three entered quietly. Kajiwara furrowed his brows. They all held legal pads up to their faces. As if hiding their smiles.

"Let's hear it."

"It's not that important," said Yoshie Dodai. She'd only recently turned twenty, and was pretty in a neat and trim kind of way that Kajiwara appreciated, lent a lascivious touch by her inordinate voluptuousness. Today, the sum total of her physicality was particularly strong.

Yoshie began undoing the buttons of her blouse. Kajiwara wasn't too taken aback. The way they hid their mouths had already clued him into what was going on. The only question now was which switch to push.

Yoshie cast aside her blouse and cupped her breasts. "Mr. Mayor, I've had a thing for you for a long time. You remind me of my late father, you see."

She walked toward him, her hips swaying. She pranced like a cat and stretched out on the desk in front of him. Without making a sound. A neat trick. He had to wonder how long it'd taken her to master it.

But his confidence didn't waver.

Yoshie jutted out her breasts. "You like me too," she whispered, the unimaginable lewdness spilling from her innocent face. "I knew it from the start. Whenever we pass by each other you always look at these. And right through my skirt at my ass. And my legs. Tonight you may do with them as you please. I'll make all your wishes come true. Nobody is in charge of anybody here. That is the most human way to live."

"I wouldn't disagree." The perfume floating down from her hot breasts and mingling with the smell of her body was turning his brains to mush. "But I'm busy right now. Get down from there."

He reached toward the control panel. Yoshie seized his wrist. Her hands were as cold as ice. And strong as steel.

"You—" A stab of pain bowed him backwards.

Three mouths smiled, revealing the fangs hidden by the legal pads.

"So it's come to this?" said Kajiwara, stiff with surprise and resignation.

"That it has. Lots of people will become our friends," said Hayase, licking his lips. This was the middle-aged man who always wore black arm covers and attended to business in a diligent manner,

with nary a frown on his face.

Kotani said in an overly persuasive manner, “Before I became like this, I was always scared, Mr. Mayor.”

Kotani and Hayase had never gotten along—the youngster and the old-timer—but as vampires they seemed to share a mutual companionship.

“I never understood how liberating it could feel to lose that fear. Now I look at everything in the new light of freedom. And best of all, there are no restrictions, no taboos on whatever I desire. You won’t find any other people as honest about who we are.”

“You’re not people,” Kajiwara groaned. “You’re living things, if barely that.” The pain in his wrist helped to deaden the fear. “No, you guys are alive and you are dead. You’re mere monsters, aroused at night by their thirst for blood. It’s embarrassing for me to admit I hired you.”

“You won’t be for long.”

Yoshie pressed the hand she’d seized to her breast. Kajiwara gulped. An electric shock traveled from his palm down his arm and to his loins. There was no denying the desire. His manhood was standing at attention.

“You know it, don’t you? The joys my body offers. Blood is not a simple meal. It sets free every lust you ever longed for. I’ll prove it to you right now.”

Her lips came closer. Her fragrant breath tickled his nose and sent his mind reeling. The only reason he didn’t lose control of his senses

completely was due to a different odor assaulting his nostrils.

Anybody who lived in this city had smelled it at least once. The abominable scent that never went away—the smell of the recent, not yet decaying—dead.

"To tell the truth," the mayor said breezily. "I have my own ways of protecting myself from the likes of you."

The three exchanged glances and grinned.

"A crucifix?"

"Garlic?"

"Holy water, like in the movies?"

"We've seen it all."

Kajiwara thrust his left hand into his suit pocket. He'd bought five that morning. He had one left. Would it work at all? How effective would one be against many?

As soon as he felt Yoshie's lips touch his neck, he ground it into her cheek. Harder than intended. His fingers sank into the flesh and the juice squirted out. A harsh way to treat a peach.

Yoshie's mouth parted in a shout and grew into a scream. Kajiwara felt sick to his stomach. He contained the bile, but the acid taste filled his mouth.

"Get out, you night crawlers!"

The strangely invigorated mayor held the dripping peach above his head and rushed his once loyal subordinates. They recoiled and

retreated. Their glowing eyes stained red, their mouths hurling curses even as they bared their fangs, he drove them from his office.

Kajiwara suddenly came to his senses. He should have them arrested. “Hey, wait there!” he called out, only afterwards realizing it was a pretty stupid thing to say.

He returned to his desk. After they’d gone two or three steps, the curse of the peach apparently lifted. The three whirled around and rushed for the exits. Doors opened and closed, and there were soft *clicks* as the locks engaged.

The cool, sterile environment of the office quickly returned and Kajiwara keenly understood the feeling of being *alone*. He sat there for a minute before toggling a switch on the control panel.

“Security.”

“Starting tomorrow, from dusk until dawn, every visitor gets screened within an inch of their lives. That includes me. No exceptions.”

“Got it.”

A direct command. A direct reply. As always. But a note of caution was there. Kajiwara steeled himself for what came next. “However, add one extra element to the personnel checks. A peach.”

“A what?” The security office was no doubt right now making sure that this call was really coming from the mayor.

“First thing in the morning—no, right now at the nearest convenience store—buy some peaches. A couple for a dollar or ten

bucks apiece, it doesn't matter. Grab as many as you can—well, no, leave some for the regular customers—look, just get five or so ready and present them to all visitors. No exceptions. Yeah, I know, it sounds like a joke, but I'm serious and this is a serious problem. I'll go through the particulars later."

"Roger." The officer was going along with him for the time being, but tenseness was still there in his voice.

"After that—Hayase and Kotani from the General Administration Division and Yoshie Dodai from General Affairs—they freaked out and attacked me. I drove them off, but they're probably still inside the building somewhere. Track them down. But—and I'm not kidding—only after you've bought the peaches. Once you find them, show 'em a peach, then arrest them."

"Understood."

He hung up and dialed the deputy chief of police. He couldn't sit on this information. As long as what added to the danger and what repelled it existed in a close symbiosis, it was best to get the truth about both out and prepare for the worst.

It was about time to declare martial law.

"Peaches, eh?"

He gazed at the fruit inside his sticky fingers with admiration. Outside the window, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex crashed to the ground, casting a Milky Way of glowing embers across the night sky.

Part Four: A Curious Affair at the Castle

Chapter One

Setsura returned to the manor house. As he approached the door, a crisscross of gashes tore across it and it flew to pieces. The gateposts severed in half. The roof crashed to the ground.

Setsura hadn't lifted a finger.

The tranquil, black-clad figure was the embodiment of dark beauty. And yet everything around him shattered themselves to pieces. This Setsura was the veritable God of Death, come dancing down out of that darkness.

The concubine's mojo should have started working by now, but it might as well be dew under a desert sun. He entered the corridor. Slashes ran down the walls and ceiling, decapitating rows of sculptures and suits of armor, littering the floor with every step he took.

Kikiou was in the basement, in his research and development laboratory. The appearance of the scholar and warlock was hard to believe. The limbs jutting out of his shoulders and pelvis, his elbows and knees, were twisted backwards. The metal rings of his power source were bent and deformed, raising a shrill screech with every revolution.

The result of Yakou's blast of *qi*.

The question of the "accidental" nature of that "friendly fire" was, for the time being, beside the point. There would be no censure

or revenge without first putting himself back together again.

"It's time to settle things with that kid," Kikiou seethed, as he tottered toward the back wall and tugged with difficulty on a rope hanging from the ceiling. With the creaking of gears, a portion of the wall opened horizontally. A hidden door.

Had anybody other than Kikiou witnessed it, the reaction would have been startled cries. Whether that surprise expressed delirium or dismay might well depend on the person.

In front of the demolished old man was a forest of arms and legs. Thousands grew out of the floor and walls. All of them—elbows, thighs, shoulders, knees, wrists and fingers—wriggled and swayed, beckoning to him.

The aged and spotted appendages of old men were there too, along with those of young women and men. Looking closer, it was apparent that they jutted through holes in the floor and walls, or hung by thin threads from the ceiling. If anything, the overwhelming sight of this grotesque warehouse of human parts was reminiscent of strange plants sprouting from a rock wall.

After ensuring that the door was closed, Kikiou rested his staff against the wall and proceeded to a foot cabinet at the other end of the room. Turning around, he grabbed hold of the handle and opened it by shifting his whole body forward.

The foot cabinet was filled with metal rings. The condition of those deepest in were impossible to tell, but of the ones closest to him, a good two-thirds—approximately two hundred on the right—were bent and rusted. The remaining hundred or so glistened with oil

and polish.

He caressed the dividing line between the old and the new. “Four thousand years has brought us this far,” he murmured. “Worn out, wrecked, rusted. They have held up well. But we have many frightful enemies in this world. One hundred more. I must give Princess a place of peaceful repose before they are exhausted. A place fresh with life where the people breathe in spells and miasmas instead of oxygen. I surmised that this city would best serve such purposes, but as expected, it will not go down without a fight.”

He returned to the squirming arms and legs, examining the room with bright eyes, like a cook perusing an array of ingredients. He then shifted his stance, and grabbed his right wrist with his deformed left hand and jerked it back and forth.

The arm separated from the shoulder. He cast it aside, and selected a right arm from the array on the floor. Reversing the action he’d just taken, he attached it to the shoulder without a hitch. It took another five minutes to reinstall the left arm and legs.

When he got to his feet and turned back toward the cabinet, a low hum directed Kikiou’s eyes toward the ceiling.

“That beast has broken in. How did he find his way here? My bones should repel his threads and the rings still turn, but—of course, that bastard Yakou!”

He retrieved his staff and left the warehouse, closing the hidden door. He raised his right hand. A section of the ceiling misted over, forming a translucent disk, upon which was projected a map of the manor house. A side view of the floor revealed a moving point of

light.

“It can be nobody else but that dark star. Oh—the ceiling and walls are caving in. Setsura, you bloody bounder, you intend to destroy the manor house. Not on my watch!”

He swung his staff. From somewhere came the resonating sound of engines winding up, the manor house’s defensive shields kicking in. The room plunged into darkness. Sparks rained down from the ceiling, along with the sound of shattering glass.

“What the hell is this?” Kikiou’s shouts bordered on screams. “What is going on?”

Setsura paused in front of the staircase leading down to the basement level. He turned around. Yakou floated there in the air a dozen or so feet behind him, his big wings spread wide.

“We appear to have arrived at the denouement,” he said with a curious smile, even mischievous.

“Are you here to get in the way?” Setsura asked.

“Nothing of the sort! I wanted to see with my own eyes. Think of me as a mere spectator. I told you where to find Kikiou’s room, after all. Still—” Yakou cast a meaningful glance around him. “This place is rigged with booby traps from top to bottom. But you haven’t stumbled into a single one. I assume you are taking measures?”

“I traced the power conduits back to the source and sent a wire into the generator room. I cannot vouch for any of the more minor details, but everything should be coming to a halt soon enough.”

“You’ve got that much up your sleeve? That’s going to put that old man in a bad mood.”

Setsura didn’t answer as he approached the stairs. “You are not going to try and stop me?”

“Nobody has ordered me to stop you.”

“This is the manor house of the Princess you serve.”

“Kikiou built this castle. Call it his birdcage. *She* doesn’t much care for it. She prefers dancing beneath the moon and sleeping on a blanket in a wild field. That is much more to her liking.”

“And to do so, she drinks blood at a whim and toys with the hearts of men. You surely know of the Hsia and Shang Dynasties.”

“That is a question for the living. I never would have taken you for such a sentimentalist. Can you place the human race anywhere but at the center of your thoughts? Even considering the people of this city?”

“This city?”

“This city. *No matter what the life form, none shall be discriminated against because of shape, nature or disposition*. Isn’t that the meaning of liberty?”

This time, Yakou’s expression darkened. He seemed to be anticipating Setsura’s next words.

“There is also the liberty not to condone such liberties.”

“Exactly. And are you speaking of yourself?”

“Everybody seems to forget, so I shall remind you. My employer is Doctor Mephisto.”

“I know.”

“Your employer and one of her followers humiliated him. He hired me to clear his name, to search out the location of this world. That is the extent of my involvement here.”

“Then why not return and inform your beloved doctor.”

“Would Kikiou be content to wish me a fond farewell?”

“No. But if that is the case, what have we been fighting about until now? I find it hard to believe it was part of the original job description.”

“I included that for free.”

“I see.”

“And one other thing.”

“What would that be?” Yakou beat his wings and settled down next to Setsura. He was getting intrigued.

“Enough with calling me Mephisto’s paramour.”

“Got it,” Yakou said with a wry smile.

Setsura continued on for thirty more feet before coming to a halt again. A black lacquered door was set into the wall.

“Here we are,” Yakou said. “I would go in fast. Kikiou should be lying in wait. You may have wrecked the generators, but the backup specter reactors are still purring away.”

Setsura probed with his devil wire, but found no gaps or entry points. The only other option was to cut through. The air hummed. The sound seemed to stick to the rectangular door. It should have been divided and quartered diagonally, corner to corner. Except that the dark "X" on the black wall welled up, as if in bas-relief.

Setsura leapt sideways. The black fluid poured down on where he was standing. It wasn't water. It wasn't any normal substance. Setsura perceived its true nature at once.

It was darkness.

He jumped up again. Manipulating the devil wire strung in from the outside, he landed at the foot of the stairs. The darkness pressed forward. The hallway transformed into a murky rectangle.

"We'd better get a move on."

Yakou reached out a hand. Setsura waved it off as he jumped to the top of the staircase. While he was in the air, the blackness sprayed upwards, staining the exits, and receded like a tidal wave.

Yakou groaned midflight, and heard an echoing scream from out of the earth. He shouted in admiration, "Did you cast your devil wire into the darkness, Setsura?"

The shadowy figure didn't move. As the darkness poured out, without a moment's hesitation, he'd flung the devil wire through the door and into the room, searching out Kikiou, and severing what he found.

Setsura knew what—not from the scream—but from the subtle quivers telegraphed along the wire. "The right hand," he said. "The left foot. The left hand and right foot."

Yakou sighed a soft sigh.

"And the head." The black fire seemed to be rising from Setsura's body.

"You satisfied?" Yakou asked, as if addressing another person entirely.

Not averting his eyes from the submerging darkness, Setsura said, "I severed both his hands, but they had been recently attached. If I do the same to the neck, will he return it to the way it was?"

Yakou looked at the wreckage around him. This was the heart of the manor house. A good half of it was totally destroyed. The genie's fury at work.

"You really made a mess of this place."

"The door has closed," Setsura said.

He wasn't making conversation. That they had conversed as much as they had—an exchange between two people with total disregard for the other's existence—was by itself strange enough.

"He can swap heads too? A handy man. For a man of flesh and

blood to survive four thousand years would require a lot of replacement parts. But what about the brain?”

Brain cells inevitably aged. Prolonging the life of them was the true mark of a scholar and alchemist.

“Sir Kikiou seems to have made his retreat. Shall we wait?”

“Not me. Perhaps a thread or two.” Setsura slowly turned to Yakou. “But there is something I wish to ask you first. Princess’s casket at the bottom of the lake—can it be brought to the surface?”

“Unfortunately, only Princess and Kikiou can answer that question.”

“Then there is nothing more I need from you.”

The line connecting the man on the ground and the man in the air was invisible to the eye, yet still cast off fiery sparks.

“Weren’t you going to make a better person of me?” teased Yakou.

“Will you sit still and take your medicine like a good boy?”

“That is unlikely.”

“In that case—”

“Yes, in that case—”

The following silence went on longer than either of them could tell. Something started at Setsura from a corner of the pile of rubble, divided neatly in two and disappeared. At the same time, from the same pile of rubble came a strand of devil wire. Before it could split

Yakou's head asunder, it dissolved into its constituent atoms.

A time-lag attack similar to that on display earlier in the courtyard. But they could already read each other's moves before they made them.

Neither made a sound, though if the scene being played out was played for the human ear, it would make a sound like the hushed hiss of a cobra.

Setsura's right fist hung lazily by his side. Then it surged up like a rushing silver snake of water. The beautiful genie's weapon traced the helix of a spiral galaxy through the sky, landing at Yakou's feet, where it burst into a thousand strands. A cocoon formed in the air and wrapped around Yakou's body, entrapping him.

A moment later, the cocoon shattered. Invisible pieces of *qi* fell all around Setsura. This *qi* was like a curtain of ball bearings caught up in a tornado. They rebounded outwards, digging into the walls and ceiling.

Setsura vaulted skyward. The arc of his leap brought him to the top of a big tree beyond the shattered roof. The particles of *qi* gushed out of the walls and ceiling like a froth of bubbles and streaked after him.

By the time Setsura had caught a feel for the physical manifestation of this *qi*, it was in midair and easy pickings. The silver spears flashed and the balls of *qi* disappeared.

Yakou sighed and flapped his wings. He flew leisurely through the mottled sunlight to the top of the tree.

The tree normally stood a hundred and fifty feet tall. Now it was almost a hundred and fifty-six, Setsura forming the addition. The wind was strong. His coat fluttered like a wavering shadow as the Prince of the Night came to meet the genie.

"What are you doing?" Yakou asked him as he floated in the air.

"Me?" Setsura asked nonchalantly. "I'm taking in the view."

Yakou was at a loss for words. The "normal" Setsura had returned. Yakou looked down at the spot where Setsura had directed his gaze. Allies or enemies, a shared state of mind seemed to link the two. The surface of the lake was as crystal clear as the blue sky above. The forest was an unfurling carpet of green so dense it bordered on black.

Setsura Aki intoned, quoting the poet Su Shi:

Rippling water shimmering on a sunny day

Mist-covered mountains shrouded in rain

Like Xi Zi, plain in form or ornately arrayed

Nothing of the West Lake fails to engage

Then he added, "The weather is clear, but Xi Zi is here. She's a bit of a bitch, though."

Xi Zi, also known as Xi Shi, a famed beauty from Yue Province in China during the Spring and Autumn Period, where the equally famed West Lake was also located.

"Why did they come to Shinjuku?"

“Either one of you should know that.”

“What are the limits of this world?”

“It does have limits.”

“Has your mistress seen them for herself?”

“I doubt it.”

“It might be a good idea if she did.”

“This is a make-believe world. Every last piece of it.”

“I figured. It gets old after a while. And under the skin.”

“She wanted to live in the real world. The living dead still wish to live.”

“Now you’re waxing bathetic.”

Setsura brushed a strand of hair from his forehead. The wind picked up. He glanced above. Birds flew over his head. A flock of wild geese.

“Like birds flying through the sky. I wonder what’s going to come along next?”

“Who knows?”

“Is that make-believe too?”

“It’s all make-believe.”

“The same goes for Shinjuku.”

“You think?”

“Now and then. What if it was all the dream of a giant clam? Will it wake up and take a look at the real world? Or let it be?”

“The real world is probably a dream also.”

Yakou looked off into the distance. “Our lives and our deaths as well. But don’t dreams have rights, too?”

Setsura nodded. “Well, we’d better get down to business. Shall we settle things here and now?”

“Let’s get down from here. I am in the mood for a cup of tea.”

Yakou glided away, folded his wings, and dropped vertically. Setsura flipped over backwards and descended head-first. Just before hitting the ground, Yakou spread his wings. With the dull pop of a leather ball hitting a glove, the wings puffed out as they filled with air.

Next to him, Setsura had already slowed to a safe approach speed, landing on his feet at the same time—and they dodged to the left and right as something rent the ground between them.

Both pairs of eyes turned and looked at the figure standing in a splash of bright light. Like the moon at dawn and the moon at dusk, the white of day changed to the white of night.

“The two of you make a fine pair,” said Doctor Mephisto. He spread out his arms like a pastor blessing his flock.

“Doctor—what are you doing here?” said Yakou, clearly rattled.

“I arrived with your mistress. She is waiting in the manor house. I saw you two flitting about and followed you out here.”

“Your timing leaves much to be desired.”

“What are you here for, Mephisto?” Setsura asked brusquely. He knew the Demon Physician’s true nature. And also that the number of his enemies had increased by at least one.

“I believe you still have that vial I gave you?”

“Relax,” Setsura said, patting his right pocket.

“Good,” said Mephisto, not looking at Yakou. “See that you use it properly.”

“Since when have you and that woman been treading the same path together?”

“Jealous?” he asked with a straight face made all the straighter by his heaven-blessed beauty.

“You’re really coming up in the world,” Setsura said.

“Be thankful for that,” he answered with equal cheek. “The world is always in need of those who understand how it works. And as for *that* woman, she brought another with her.”

“Kanan-san?”

“That is what you called her back when she was my patient.”

“We’ll take care of things afterward,” Setsura said to Yakou. He turned around and had taken two or three steps when he said over his shoulder, “Ah, your face is red, Yakou.”

Chapter Two

The three sat in the large room. The room was decorated in a classic, even “antique” style. Sitting atop a red lacquer bureau from the Ming Dynasty was a gold and silver vase inlaid with crystal, a product of the Spring and Autumn Period.

The light seeping through the white silk curtains was twined by the thin line of smoke rising from a sapphire incense burner decorated with birds. The room filled with the sublime aroma of Japanese yew.

The room otherwise followed a western-style architecture.

The Demon Princess had told Mephisto to wait there while she tended to business elsewhere. Setsura sat serenely in a black chair. Mephisto chose the ottoman and calmly crossed his legs. Yakou morosely paced the red carpet.

Once united in purpose against the four invaders, they now shared nothing in common—not their positions or their states of mind. Mephisto sported white fangs. Yakou had attached himself to Princess. Setsura alone had not changed.

And yet, however estranged their emotions, the room itself strangely dissipated the more physical aspects of their beauty. The light in Setsura’s black eyes faded. The breath passing Mephisto’s lips lost its fragrance. With each of Yakou’s sighs, the spectrum of scents in the air lost another of its colors.

The room was wrapped in a kind of pensive chagrin. These erstwhile allies must surely be experiencing similar emotions. Though the man in black lounging in the chair—as if kissed by the bright sunlight—showed no signs of allowing his happy-go-lucky spirits to fall.

Half an hour had passed since they came to this room. Setsura was the first one to speak. “She must want us to really cool our heels.”

“Bored already?” Yakou said, like a parent reprimanding a child. “Exercise a little patience.”

“What’s with making the guests sit around for half an hour twiddling their thumbs? Strange even for four-thousand-year-old Chinese etiquette. You did that study abroad thing in England, didn’t you? When it comes to standing up for the Orient, seems some of us aren’t pulling our weight.”

“So says the villain who came here to destroy Princess. Ask Doctor Mephisto. She suffered greatly in order to bring Miss Kanan back here. It stands to reason that her care should take precedence over ours.”

“So a Princess covered in Mercurochrome, eh? Emperor Zhou would roll over in his grave.”

“I will not permit you to slander Princess like that,” said Yakou, a dangerous edge in his voice.

Setsura calmly turned to Mephisto on his right. “Yo, Mephisto. Give the guy something for his blood pressure.” Then, “Oh, right.

No talking about blood. Traitor. Well, how's it feel becoming a vampire?"

"Feels rather excellent," the man in white answered in a slightly breathy voice that would tickle the erogenous zones of male and female—and the infirmed on their deathbeds—alike.

Though Setsura was not entranced, to this doctor, he possessed a kind of deeply-rooted *charm* that he simply couldn't put his finger on. He might even call it a kind of lasciviousness.

"I have seen many things. Things I knew. Things I did not. But merely one of the latter would justify the experience."

"Well, well, well," Setsura said in a slightly bored manner, and stretched like a languorous cat.

A shadow fell across the room. The brightness and intensity of the light didn't change. A small smile came to Yakou's face. Halfway through a rather feigned yawn, Setsura glanced at the door in the back. A blue glass door.

A willowy figure floated up like a dream and opened the door and walked up to them.

Any one of them could've been forgiven for believing this was not the same woman who, several hours ago, had struggled through the valley of death after a fight to the finish. Aside from the wave of black hair covering half her face, her beauty and sensual magnetism had not faded in the slightest, not from the first time they had met her. The robe covering her breasts and hanging down to her feet fluttered like the wings of a butterfly in an unexpected breeze.

“I see you have returned, Setsura,” said the Demon Princess, in gently mocking tones. “The tongue that swore it would never become my servant is still in good working order?”

“Yessiree.”

Yakou’s forehead twitched at the glibness of the reply, but Princess only smiled. “You certainly put on a gaudy show. And Kikiou got the brunt of it, I hear?”

“So it would seem.”

“Very good. The man just doesn’t die no matter how many times you kill him. He should show up any minute now.” Dismissing Setsura’s rampage, she continued, “And now to prove that I am as good as my word, come along.”

She turned around, completely ignoring Mephisto and Yakou.

“A moment perhaps?” said Mephisto.

“No,” was the frosty reply. “Yakou, escort the white-caped doctor to one of Kikiou’s laboratories. Whichever one you end up in, I’m sure he’ll be as happy as a kid in a candy store.”

“Yes.”

Yakou bowed deeply and apologized to Mephisto. “I’m sorry, but Princess does not acknowledge the presence of outsiders.”

The woman in white and the man in black had already left through the blue door.

She led Setsura down the long hallway toward a dark door. He felt as if he had traversed a far distance. From the doors set into

either side of the hallway came the sounds of men and women weeping. Abrading sounds like fingernails clawed unceasingly at the doors. Doors from which issued long, sad songs.

Now and then a window appeared. If he squinted, he could make out the blue lake and flowers waving in the wind that wafted across the water's surface. A legendary phoenix flying over the faraway mountains.

"Are you tired?" asked the Demon Princess.

"Yes," Setsura answered, in a voice that split the difference between fatigue and sleep deprivation.

"And yet you went ahead and barged into my kingdom. You really need to think these things through. In addition to banging me, it took the living livers of a thousand woman and children to give Emperor You and Emperor Zhou the spunk you have now. In other words, from the time I met you, it was clear that you had all the makings of the next King of Hades."

"If people who never considered the consequences of their actions were born to be devils, then this country would have gone to the dogs a lot quicker than it already has."

Setsura lazily tossed off that bombshell. His face clouded over. "Hold on. A world full of devils would be pretty dull. Ah, I get it," he said, nodding in agreement. "The world is supposed to be a peaceful place."

Princess shot him an exasperated expression and pulled on the doorknob. For several seconds, the blue darkness enveloped them.

The shadows at his feet disappeared.

"It is light outside. Why the sudden darkness?" he asked blandly. "Or rather, the opposite. Since you love darkness so much, why is it always so bright?"

"Hmm." For a rare change, that was all that Princess said.

She walked on. Setsura followed her deeper in. The blue glow was like the bottom of the sea. His eyes were drawn to a sharp gleam. A statue of the Buddha covered with gold leaf and an elliptical pavilion draped with gauzy curtains.

Princess approached the Buddha and pressed on its chest. "Are you awake?" she asked shortly.

"Y-yes." Her hoarse voice notwithstanding, Setsura could clearly discern the identity of the speaker.

"As you suspect, she whom you call Takako is in here."

The Demon Princess flashed a ghostly smile, the kind of smile that must inevitably scratch the itch of a stranger's psychic wound and bring up blood.

"But fling your threads till kingdom come and you won't break through. This is the casket in which I have spent the last four thousand years—and long before that. Hoh. Not the makeshift bedrooms employed by General Bey and the others. If necessary, Takako could live here forever. Never aging, never seeing the false sun, hungering and thirsting for eternity, living on and on in the pitch dark. A painful thought, no? Depending on your answer, from that day forward, I will close the door to this room and never allow

anyone to open it again."

Setsura said wearily, "You are a woman with a penchant for making a major production out of the most trivial of resolutions." All he cared about was sealing the place shut and throwing away the key. "That leaves Kanan-san in something of a fix. So how do I get you to open it?"

"I believe I have already stipulated the terms. You must become my servant of your own free will. That is all."

"That leaves me in something of a fix."

"Why should it? Will you cast her aside?"

Setsura said, with the gloomy aura of a young intellectual agonizing over a philosophical thesis, "It'd be nice if you turned that moral compass around now and then."

"I am not other people, and neither are you. That look of distress on your face fascinates me. Think it over carefully."

"Oh. You don't need an answer right away?"

"Not at all. But won't you become all the more morose the longer you drag it out? She will grow hungrier and hungrier inside the casket. This hunger and thirst are not fixed quantities. They grow day by day. How much more over an eternity?"

"You really are a thoroughly determined little bitch," Setsura sulked. "I guess there's no sense in dragging this thing out."

Observing the pondering Setsura carefully, Princess tented her fingers as if wondering something herself. "Go into the bathroom."

“The bathroom?” said Setsura, goggling a bit.

“Behind the curtains. The bath is filled with the blood of virgins.”

“How did you collect it all?”

“Four thousand years of history. Nations go to war and hundreds of thousands die. Take your time and walk a battlefield or two. We have stored up more than enough in the manor house. I will say this about Kikiou—he is the kind of man who spares no effort to fulfill my needs.”

Setsura shrugged. He watched Princess pace to the curtains. The silk curtains parted like a light mist. A strong scent assaulted his nostrils. Blood.

“May I come in?” Setsura asked, seized by curiosity of a different sort.

“That is what I’m here for. Come in.”

Setsura entered and looked at the dragon-shaped bathtub. “After I’ve met with Kanan-san,” he countered. “You may say she is fine, but using you as the standard of comparison does not bode well for her. I’ll accompany you once we’ve confirmed that she’s not dying while I’m bathing.”

“Huh. You’re a distrustful man. So, what do you do to put food on the table?”

“I make *senbei*.”

“Hoh.”

“And why would you ask a question like that?”

“With a face like that, you should be in the movies. No need to waste away in a city like this.”

“I’ve had a few offers in my time,” Setsura said with a touch of pride.

“Of course. And what happened?”

“I turned them down, of course.”

“Why?” the Demon Princess asked, clearly intrigued. More than the questions and answers, conversing with Setsura seemed entertainment enough.

“Pick a reason.” Setsura grimaced.

“Why turn your back on such opportunities?” Princess pressed.

“Sex scenes were usually involved.”

“You don’t like sleeping with women?”

“In front of an audience? No.”

“Then here will suit you fine. If I do not beckon them, no one else will come.”

“I’m not big on nude scenes, either.”

“You’ve made your point. Don’t push it.”

“We’ll proceed after I’ve seen Kanan-san with my own two eyes. How’d this conversation turn into a negotiation, anyway?”

Princess gave Setsura a brief but poisonous look and slipped

back through the curtains. Setsura followed her. She stood next to the Buddha and fixed her gaze on the shining surface. At length, she leaned over and touched the Buddha's slick engraved chest.

A slit opened vertically. The statue split into two halves. There appeared the unexpected sight of a completely changed young woman. Takako, stark naked, her eyes closed.

"Satisfied?"

"I still want to hear her speak."

"Did you hear?" Princess whispered to Takako.

Takako nodded.

"Say something."

Takako's lips barely moved. "Setsura-san—I so wanted to see you—"

"Happy now?"

Setsura didn't answer. His sharp gaze fell on Takako's neck.

"Those marks are mine."

Setsura moved Takako's lips, showing her gums. The pair of unsightly, ferocious-looking fangs appeared.

"Hoh. Now what do you do? That woman has been elevated from a mere woman to my servant."

Setsura removed his fingers from the purple lips and looked instead at the Demon Princess. A wicked glow suffused her eyes. A small part of that light might even be tinged by fear.

“That bastard—he has returned.”

Setsura answered coolly, “And once again, you have met *me*.”

Chapter Three

Under normal circumstances, this Adonis and that Venus would have been drawn together by a taut thread of murderous intent. But when it came to the Demon Princess, though the knife-edge of tension was very much there, the keen will to murder was not.

"If Kanan-san has become a vampire, I shall destroy you in return. If humanity still resides in her, then I shall destroy you to make her whole. That is something *I* can do."

"I understand, Setsura-I-know and Setsura-I-do-not." She licked her lips with the tip of her red tongue. "To be sure, she has not *completely* become my servant. But if you do anything funny, Setsura, not being *completely* immortal, one word from me and she will tear out her own heart."

"Why did you not take all of her blood?" Setsura asked.

A strange question. As bait to manipulate him, it seemed obvious to him that Princess would need to present to him the *normal* Takako. Setsura's doubts sprang from imagining her suffering before being brought here. Whatever induced her to turn Takako must have proved quite a threat even for Demon City.

And then to leave a piece of the human intact and choose this harder road instead—to what end?

The Demon Princess said, "Because I knew it would annoy you all the more. We weep over the dead for a time and then move on.

But mourning and anguishing alongside the dying goes on and on and on. At the beginning, that woman was useless flesh. I did not care what became of her. I turned her into live bait to lure you here. Do you really want to know what she was about to become before I made her mine? Let her tell you in her own words."

Takako's mouth opened. The lamentations that flowed forth would make a hardened criminal want to cover his ears. "*Help me—Setsura-san—my throat is burning—my body—crawls with slime and insects—the cold makes me shake—please—give me your—*"

Her face was calm and impassive, like she was asleep. She didn't move in the slightest. And yet there was no denying the pain and suffering in the sounds bleating out of her.

The Demon Princess quietly backed away, an almost unconscious action. And she took note of her own surprise. "Hoh. I am retreating. Because of a mere man. But a mere man won't save her. I didn't make you men wait while I frittered about in my wardrobe. That damned Kikiou. It's times like this that I'm in the mood for a good fuck and he goes AWOL."

She calmly opened her arms wide. "Go ahead," she said defiantly. "Take off my head. Give it your best shot." She paused. "What? You can't? Afraid of what will happen next? Then I will show you. Either way, the man I so mercilessly wounded should receive his just rewards."

Princess raised her right hand and brought it to her chest. The hand stopped, like something had bound it. She wasn't stymied, but moved the hand again. Setsura undid the threads wrapped around her

wrist. Otherwise they would sever her arm. He knew the effect on her would be minimal. The problem was the effect on Takako.

Princess reached up with her other hand and undid the collar of her robe, exposing her bountiful breasts. The pale mounds swayed and glimmered in the blue light like living things jutting out of the ocean depths. Five lines of red flashed across their contours. She gouged horizontal lines across both breasts with her fingers.

A scream—not from Princess, but from the casket. Setsura turned. Takako's chest was covered with red. Five lines across each breast, exactly the same as Princess.

"I feel no pain. The same cannot be said for her. Do you want to try it with my neck? I'll die just to prove my point."

Princess smiled brightly. The smile just as quickly faded. Setsura looked back at her as if he were the incarnation of Rakshasa.

"Do you have any intent to kill me? What did you come here for?" Not spoken in fear, but in admiration, as could be expected from the Demon Princess.

"Let's give it a rest for now," Setsura said.

"Get out!" Princess pointed at the door with her bloody hand. "Go wherever suits you. No matter where, I will know. If you wish to destroy this house and this world, enjoy yourself. But you will regret it afterwards, and at length. I will drag your soul back here through the mud and make you my slave."

Halfway down the hallway, Mephisto came to a halt. Ahead of him, Yakou peered over his shoulder. "What?"

There was a door in the wall on Mephisto's right. "This door bears the scars of some strange substance being expelled from it."

Yakou nodded. Damaged by Setsura's devil wires, Kikiou's laboratory had spat out the "darkness."

"Whose room is this?"

"Sir Kikiou's private room."

"And laboratory?"

"Yes." Yakou glanced at Mephisto and then at the door. "Do you wish to go in?"

"Would that be all right?"

"If you can put up with a bit of unsightliness."

"It is all the same to me."

"Then let us inquire within." Yakou walked up to the door and knocked softly.

The reply came a long minute later, as if spoken by a patient on his deathbed. "What do you want?"

"It is Yakou. I've brought along a guest." There was a touch of glee in Yakou's voice. He truly loved giving Kikiou a hard time.

"Go away."

"A very special guest."

"Who?"

"Doctor Mephisto."

“Oh!” the old man said excitedly. The greatest warlock of the centuries was momentarily at a loss for words. “I’m somewhat indisposed at the moment, but if you do not mind, please come in.” For good or ill, this wasn’t a guest he could readily refuse.

Yakou opened the door and ushered in Mephisto. The room was in good order. The antique table, laboratory instruments—everything preserved in its condition from the day they were made.

Mephisto glanced around the room and made a curious observation. “Terrible and amazing things occur when he wears that face. A man who cannot help but destroy the world with a single strand. He belongs to Demon City.”

“Indeed,” Yakou said gravely. He too knew something of those “terrible and amazing” things.

“Sir Mephisto—” came Kikiou’s voice from somewhere.

“Where are you?” Mephisto’s gaze focused on a corner of the far wall.

“There is a cord there—pull on it.”

Mephisto tugged on the cord. The hidden door slid open, welcoming him inside. At the rear of the forest of arms and legs, Kikiou was lying in front of a floor cabinet. Limbs were scattered all about. The strange scene was suggestive of Kikiou transforming into a ghoul.

Though a ghoul without arms or legs. The unmoving torso didn’t even have a head attached.

“What a strange reception this is,” Mephisto murmured.

As if in response, “I am in the cabinet. Open the door.”

“I will—” Yakou quickly stepped forward. And just as quickly stopped. The hands lying around him reached out and grabbed at his feet and clothing.

“Allow me,” Mephisto said.

This time the waving stalks of the hands and legs cleared a path before him, so neatly done it could almost be called pretty. Mephisto leaned over and pulled open the door.

“Thank you,” came Kikiou’s voice from the black interior of the cabinet. His head seemed to sprout out of the bottom shelf.

“You look tired,” Mephisto said softly. He wasn’t poking fun.

“An acquaintance of yours did this to me. Every time we run into each other, he sends a chill down my spine. I finally hid myself away in here. Please excuse my greeting you in such an unsightly manner.” He cast a cold look at Yakou. “You may leave.”

But the erstwhile English exchange student feigned deafness. Kikiou glared at him some more, then directed his attention to the bottom of the cabinet, at an arm lying there.

“I managed to use that to toss myself into the cabinet, but the effort wore me out. If Doctor Mephisto could literally lend me a hand—”

“What would you like me to do?” Mephisto really did seem to be volunteering to save Kikiou.

“It should be simple for the good Doctor.” A shadow fell across the old man’s face. “I would like you to retrieve the torso from the other room and attach the arms, legs and this head. The part inserted into the torso still remains. I cannot install a new one.”

“That is indeed problematic. I would like to say I agree, but—”

“But it cannot be done?”

“That would be correct. I could strip away the damaged parts. New limbs may prove difficult, though.”

“Why would that be?”

Kikiou glowered at the doctor’s handsome countenance. The animosity soon dissipated. Such was the power of his beauty.

“You do not understand?”

“Not at all.”

“Yakou, show him.”

“Yes,” Yakou said, with a slight nod—a slight smile—on his noble face.

He took a step backwards and spread out a black wing, just his left one, like a fan. Its fifteen foot wingspan was proof of his ancestry. He lazily flapped it once. A small gale gusted through the room. The writhing arms and legs separated from the elbows and knees and dropped to the floor.

“What in the world!” gasped Kikiou.

“Whomever you may have fought before, your opponent this time

was Setsura Aki," Mephisto said, rather like a proud parent. "Now you understand what I meant? What he takes apart, nobody can put back together. Not even me."

"Then I have a request to make," Kikiou said in a hoarse voice. "If there are no limbs, then they must be made. Is that not something the name of Doctor Mephisto is good for?"

Kikiou could hardly even bat an eyelash. He had thrown himself in here in a last, desperate effort, stifling his breath in order to pass undetected. If a murderous intent seized Doctor Mephisto at this moment, the brains behind this band of vampires would be utterly without recourse.

"Make limbs for the infamous warlock," Doctor Mephisto mused in a heartfelt manner. "I understand. However, you must leave all the details to me."

"I would greatly appreciate it." The old man's head nodded forward on what little there was left of his neck.

Mephisto plucked up the head and carried it against his left hip as he strode to the door. "Get that, would you?" he said to Yakou.

Yakou hauled up the torso and tucked it under his arm like a sack of flour and followed him back to the laboratory.

"You can use the tools and instruments here," said Kikiou.

"Unfortunately, no," answered Mephisto.

"And why is that?"

"This is why." Mephisto raised his hand. A light sound clattered

forth from the floor. The faint oscillations traveled along the floor and through the walls and ceiling.

The table split apart, as did the chair, the flasks and test tubes and distillation equipment, parchments bearing the figures of chemical formulas, bottles and vials. The cut ends that fell to the floor had scarily smooth edges.

Silence flowed back into the room. Then Kikiou's hair-raising voice rose from the depths of his soul and filled the laboratory. "Of all the people in the world, my opponent had to be Setsura Aki—the horror of that knowledge is now seared into my being."

Chapter Four

The men arrived, wearing suits and neckties and carrying attaché cases (ironically dubbed the "Three Sacred Treasures" of Japan's professional class), at Mayor Kajiwara's office the morning after the fall of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex, precisely at nine o'clock.

When his new secretary told him their names and portfolios, Kajiwara had to smile. At times like this, quieting troubled waters was the most indispensable of his job qualifications. Considering the stormy seas that assaulted him on a daily basis, the sense of disquiet he felt at this particular moment was apart from the norm.

Vice-Minister of Defense Yoshiaki Sawashima

Cabinet Secretary Daizaburo Gengi

Welfare Minister Tsutomu Enkaida

Along with three bodyguards. Sitting in front of the row of politicos, Kajiwara made sure they saw the surprise in his eyes. He said, a slight tremor in his voice, "I must wonder what in the world has brought you gentlemen to our turbulent burg?"

"Let me get right to the point," said Vice-Minister Yoshiaki Sawashima. He had a frame that imparted the impression of a drawn saber. "This city is steeped in vampires. We have come to impose martial law."

“You must be joking!” Kajiwara said.

Cabinet Secretary Daizaburo Gengi said, “You are the man in charge of Demon City. Let’s lay all our cards on the table and speak candidly. Otherwise, there’s no need for us to be here.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Last night, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex was engulfed in flames and collapsed. There’s no way we can stay out of this. In short, during the course of this latest vampire incident, we fortified the facilities in order to seize the woman at the heart of the problem, the leader of the vampires. We failed to achieve our goal. In the process, Abe of the Joint Staff Council and Director Otaguro of the National Institutes of Science and Technology ended up buried beneath the rubble. Prime Minister Kongodai alone was saved and is currently being treated for shock.”

Kajiwara quietly took in the Cabinet Secretary’s melancholic words. The tone of his voice obviated the need to ferret out the purpose of the visit. The man was all but admitting that the upper echelons of the Japanese government were involved in the previous night’s conflagration up to their necks. And this was just the beginning.

“I don’t know what to say at a time like this,” the mayor said in a gravelly voice. His audience all nodded. “But allow me one objection.”

“What is that?”

“When our fire department was dispatched to the scene this

morning, they were met by a company of SDF search and rescue personnel. Right now they're all bogged down in a squabble over jurisdiction. Could you ask your troops to stand down?"

Vice-Minister of Defense Sawashima's imposing face paled. "You don't seem to grasp the true significance of the situation. If we fail, the vampires will surely take control of Shinjuku. They chose this place to mount their invasion because it already stunk to high heaven. Our investigators inform us that many of your citizens are already becoming vampires. Minister Enkaida, could you provide us with some concrete numbers?"

The bodyguard next to Minister Enkaida handed over his briefcase to the minister, who extracted a file and opened it on the table. The minister sported a bow tie and wire-rim glasses with thick lenses that didn't dim the light in his calculating eyes.

"These are the vampire transformations calculated by the Ministry over the past three days alone. The rate is rapid and increasing. Taking this as the base and running projection models through our computers, after three more days, the entirety of Shinjuku's population will be vampires."

Anticipating Kajiwara's surprise at finding out that their investigators had stolen into the city to collect this data, Minister Enkaida spit out the information with a perverse pleasure.

"Hmm," Kajiwara said with a look of deep concern. "So, how do you suggest we proceed?"

"Today at noon we will institute martial law for this night only. Then at dawn, only those citizens who can walk in the full light of

the sun will be escorted outside the ward. The monsters who remain will be eradicated."

"And how will you accomplish that?"

"Vampires have the intelligence of human beings," continued the Vice-Minister of Defense. "We can't expect them to hide themselves where, as humans, they know they'd be easily found. They're not going to let their guard down for a single night. Mounting a frontal assault would be dangerous even for our eradication crews. So it stands to reason in this instance—and this is only me thinking out loud for now—to deploy a tactical nuclear weapon."

The temperature of the room seemed to drop, made colder by the knowledge of Sawashima's objectives.

Kajiwara paused long enough to make it look like he was seriously considering the scheme. Then he said, "With all due consideration, I want to make it clear that when it comes to vampires and tactical nuclear devices and the like—in the off-chance that PR flacks from other wards are listening in even now—I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"You—what game do you think you're playing here?" rumbled the Cabinet Secretary. A vein throbbed in his forehead. There was something to the proposition that a politician's merits rested upon his abilities of oration, though the delivery here was a little thin.

"You can't grasp the unfathomable threat posed to the world? And it all originated in your—in this accursed city. I have to wonder about your sense of responsibility."

“That it originated in this city—I find that difficult to understand as well. As for this vampire epidemic you speak of, I’m afraid it’s nonsense. What genuine threat has actually been realized in the outside world?”

The three government officials exchanged silent glances. As the Vice-Minister of Defense leaned forward, Kajiwara held up a hand to ward him off. The timing was perfect. The Vice-Minister gulped and swallowed his retort.

“Alas, you seem to forgetting something very important.” Kajiwara spoke firmly. The gleam in his eyes almost gave him the aura of a different person. “This city is not like any other city. As you so kindly put it, this accursed place stinks to high heaven. That is why, according to the law—according to the Japanese constitution—Demon City Shinjuku shall govern itself with complete autonomy. Whatever goes on here, stays here, and is dealt with here according to Shinjuku’s laws and ordinances. Outside interference is allowed only when a threat that has arisen inside Shinjuku becomes a threat on a recognizable scale, and its effects reach beyond Shinjuku’s borders. And when the consent is given by the mayor of Shinjuku and a petition to act is properly filed. Could you educate me as to the applicable state of affairs corresponding to those two points?”

A long moment of silence followed.

The Welfare Minister said, “Mr. Mayor—you do know there are vampires—”

“I know, I know.” Kajiwara nodded his head emphatically. “Everybody in this city knows. I would like to tell you I know all

about their characters, their abilities, all aspects of their lives. But that would be a lie. This government collects no such information."

"How irresponsible!" The Cabinet Secretary *thumped* his fist on the table. "I cannot believe what I am hearing! You are the highest executive in this city. Isn't it your job to find out what these monsters are made of, and where they're headed next? Should that ignorance lead to the death of one innocent citizen, it would be unforgivable."

"Excuse me, but in the ward where you live, are there not murderers living among the citizenry? Do the mayor and the authorities comprehend the personalities and the predilections of the victims and the perpetrators with anything approaching absolute certainty?"

"They're human beings."

"I am talking about the citizenry," Kajiwara said crisply. "I don't know about anywhere else, but here in Shinjuku a citizen can be something other than a human being. Well, that's this foul and accursed city for you. Submit a change-of-residence registration, and with the consent of the ward council any living thing may call himself a citizen. To tell the truth, the consent of the ward council technically isn't even required. We don't assert the authority to refuse entry. Aside from a mailing address and the census information, it's none of the ward's business anyway."

"This is no time for such high-minded idealism!" sneered the Vice-Minister of Defense. Compared to the ogre-like countenances of the other two, his at least appeared normal. "Well, this certainly

puts Shinjuku and its mayor in a whole new light. But things having progressed to this point, we can't very well leave it alone."

"Because things have progressed well beyond your ability to grasp. You do not comprehend the nature of the dangerous situation itself. I would rather you took responsibility for the unauthorized use of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex and its destruction. Naturally, I expect the rest of Tokyo to bear the cost of hauling away the rubble. Questions about the citadel's purpose and the activities that went on there are sure to come up at the next council meeting."

"It's obvious that any further discussions will prove pointless," Vice-Minister Sawashima said to the other two. "We will have to proceed to the next course of action by ourselves. Is that okay with you, Kajiwara-san?"

"No problem," said the mayor, nodding resolutely, but he couldn't help but feel disheartened. "I shall submit a claim request vis-à-vis the destruction of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex later. Take care."

After the three left, Kajiwara got up from the sofa and returned to his executive chair. His legs were shaking. He hadn't noticed until now. The effectiveness of that chair was truly miraculous. His legs and guts calmed down in thirty seconds.

He tried to fathom what had just happened. But he couldn't wrap his mind around it. Something was missing. What he needed was a cigar. He picked up the phone and spoke to his secretary, but it seemed they were out of cigars.

“How about the peaches?” he asked.

“We do have those.”

“Bring one in, if you please.”

The peach was brought in.

“You couldn’t have peeled it first?”

“Sorry.”

“No matter. You can go.”

Kajiwara peeled the peach in silence. By the time the pale flesh appeared, his thoughts had ordered themselves. He took a bite as he gazed out the window. The order stood to screen all pedestrians at the gates with peaches. Nothing unusual had turned up so far. The night watch had been increased, and equipped with stakes and hammers or crossbows. Work was already underway to make announcements on the local television station, and notice had been placed in the newspapers warning people to refrain from going out at night.

And as for the others—there were those three.

The owners of such unworldly beauty rose up in Kajiwara’s thoughts. Their battle above the clouds in that unknown country must be unfolding even now. He hadn’t heard anything from Setsura since he’d entered the domain of the Demon Princess. Doctor Mephisto had vanished from his hospital the night before. Yakou hadn’t been seen after last being spotted at the west entrance of Chuo Park.

Could he trust them? Kajiwara had resolved in his heart that he must. But as mayor, that wasn't enough. In this city, faith without works was dead. He had to act.

Kajiwara had no intent of pitting the citizens of his city against the vampires, good guys against bad. Was the vampire transformation so justifiably loathsome in the first place? Various religious groups would undoubtedly raise strong objections. And weren't there some among the human population who didn't mind at all becoming creatures of the night?

For example, the kids who partied all night in Kabuki-cho and Shinjuku Nichome. Their only attachment to the daylit world was in order to earn their keep. If they could survive rent-free off a few nutrient drinks, how many would be perfectly content to spend their lives in the dark? And if they found drinking the blood of others immoral, what about the blood of their comrades?

Taking this a step further, could they sate their hunger with their own blood? Or for that matter, synthetic compounds with the same properties?

Whether the world of the day or the world of the night, living in Shinjuku made them citizens. Nobody discriminated according to sex, occupation, or race. The ward would not be joining forces with those panicked over a "vampire transformation."

It should be enough to resolve the conflicts at an individual level. Should violence break out, then it was time for the authorities to step in. Those who inflicted harm on others without justification would be detained according to the law, repeat offenders isolated

and institutionalized with all due process.

For the time being it would be necessary, of course, to distinguish among those who wished to become vampires and those who did not. But doing so was still a work in progress.

His teeth bit into the peach pit. Kajiwara scowled. The city below him shone in the sunlight. He knew better than most that this was the time when he must act.

The night continued to assault the day.

The inhabitants of the abandoned sewers and basements and undergrounds grew steadily in number. Despite the summer weather, it seemed that more and more people were wearing scarves around their necks, and sunglasses and gloves.

Those who had been happy-go-lucky until the day before squatted in the shadows with labored breaths, while their neighbors fell into the habit of frequenting only nearby markets when it was time to do the dinner shopping.

The parents of the exhibitionistic Miss Shinjuku were overjoyed when she started wearing long-sleeved pantsuits upon leaving the house. Except one night she never came home, and was found sleeping in the basement of an abandoned building a mile away.

But far more tragic incidents were also taking place. A Yaraicho professor of black magic determined that his next-door neighbor was a vampire, and stole into his house, stake and mallet in hand. But his staked victim turned out to be the vampire's wife, taking a midday nap.

In her home outside Shinjuku, Tomoko Kanan pored through the legends and folklore of ancient China for two days straight, absorbing every bit of information she could with her bloodshot eyes.

His body covered with dirt and dust, General Ryuuki slept in an abandoned Shinto shrine in Shin-Okubo and dreamed blood-red dreams. As if mocking his ability to survive without drinking the blood of others, those dreams had him living in a heightened state of anguish.

Curiously enough, General Bey bedded down in a block of model housing near Shinjuku Station. The houses were built with the most modern of lightweight steel frames, the facades finished with simulated stucco. This foreign vampire lord rested comfortably on a soft waterbed. The only dream he dreamt was of a disco in Kabuki-cho. As the eye brutally wounded by the Demon Princess healed—the pain was already gone—he plotted the revenge he would take when the sun set.

A knock at the door. Without putting the beaker and lead spoon down, Mephisto said, “Come in.” He was in one of Kikiou’s laboratories. “What do you want?” he added, not acknowledging Setsura. Not looking at the person he was addressing was one of his distinguishing characteristics.

“Call it a consultation,” Setsura said, his voice more hushed than usual.

“About what?”

“That’s okay. Continue with whatever you’re doing.”

“And what request would you make of this traitor?”

“This is about what happened before.”

“Then hurry up and speak your mind.”

Mephisto waved the spoon back and forth. A rainbow cloud rose from the beaker, assuming a geometrical shape as it approached the ceiling.

“Pretty smoke, that.”

Mephisto placed the spoon and beaker on the table and turned to the intruder.

“My bad, eh?” Setsura smiled, a mien so unflappable as to be taken for the guileless smile of an angel. “Yakou wouldn’t be in, would he?”

“You can see for yourself.”

“He was with you.”

“State your business.”

“Two requests, actually.”

“I shall at least listen.”

“Thanks.”

Setsura tentatively approached and pointed at a chair leaning against the wall. “Mind if I take a seat?”

“I’m not using it.”

“Then I will.”

The Demon Physician glanced dismissively at his friend settling onto the cramped wooden chair.

“What are you doing?”

“Exactly what it looks like.”

“I haven’t got a clue.”

“Fashioning hands and feet for Kikiou. From bones.”

“Wow. I’m impressed. Obviously just lopping off his head won’t do.”

“Perhaps you should try a different decapitation technique.”

“Rather than that old geezer, why not devote your attentions to someone with more of a future?” Setsura took a white flower from his pocket. A moon lily. “Prepare this the right way and we could return Yakou to normal. I’d like you to think through the possibilities.”

“Huh.”

Mephisto plucked the flower from his fingers and brought it up to his nose. The flower seemed to glimmer, as if literally glowing with moonlight. If Kikiou or Yakou were privy to this conversation, they’d hit the roof. Or merely conclude that Setsura had finally lost the rest of his marbles.

Mephisto was a vampire, one of Kikiou’s colleagues. Yakou was too. And yet here was Setsura seeking Mephisto’s help in curing Yakou and destroying this world. And far from rejecting the possibilities, Mephisto showed every sign of going along with him.

Who were these two whose actions confused the most incomprehensible creatures of the night?

“Fine.” Mephisto nodded. “And the other request?”

“This one’s a bit trickier.”

“Let me decide that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Stop stringing it out.”

“I want you to cure Kanan-san.”

Part Five: Restoring the Face of Evil

Chapter One

The request startled even Mephisto. “You are a man with a habit of making strange demands.” He eyed Setsura carefully. “Did you think I would agree?”

“Kanan-san must be saved in any case,” Setsura answered with a straight face. “But rescue her now and she would remain half a vampire. Returning her to normal society would be difficult.”

“Then I guess the only other option is to destroy Princess,” Mephisto said breezily.

While ostensibly helping Princess, he had no inhibitions against plotting her downfall. To this doctor, other people—save one—were never the object of sentimental affectation. And right now not even him.

“She’s a hard nut to crack,” Setsura said, almost as if loath to admit it. “Wrapping things up will take time and effort. But it is the fastest way to restore Kanan-san to her former self.”

“Perhaps becoming her servant would hasten things along?” Mephisto emptied the contents of a flask on the table into his left hand. The purple liquid was the color of wine. Spilling from his palm, it turned into a shower of white beads, making a hard *pinging* sound when they struck the floor.

“It may be the only way to belong to a different world while preserving a knowledge of the real one. You are the one she wants,

and her desires cannot be taken lightly."

"You trust her that far?"

"No," Mephisto said, coolly withdrawing his previous recommendation.

"So?"

"I will take care of it."

Setsura nearly fell out of his chair. He'd been prepared to spend a good amount of time convincing Mephisto to take up the challenge.

"You sure you're okay with this?"

"You are the one who came here with his hand out. Don't start complaining now."

Setsura shrugged. "One more thing, if you please, Doctor. *When* will you start taking care of it?"

"This afternoon."

"This afternoon? You do know that—"

"Yes, the sun always shines in this world. But I can easily tell the difference between day and night. It is now dusk."

"Impressive."

"Princess will soon be awaking. And when she does, she will be aware of everything I do."

"Turned you into a human GPS monitor, eh? That woman could really get under the skin." Setsura spoke in a teasing manner. "But

thems the breaks, I guess. When the night comes, you can go back to your beloved research. Say, how about inventing an anti-cootie drug that'll repel the girls and make a name for yourself at Shinjuku's Playboy Club?"

"Fascinating idea," Mephisto said, as if honestly intrigued. Though were that face to express an interest, it would take even the most cynical of golddiggers years to get over the crush.

"You'd better get going."

"Starting tomorrow afternoon, how long is this going to take you?"

"Three days to start with."

"Make that one."

"Three days."

"A day and a half."

"If you're going to abandon whole numbers, then two and a half days."

"One takes what one can get," Setsura compromised. He started to say, "In exchange—"

"What are you two bargaining about?"

Half of a beautiful face and the owner of that face appeared in the doorway.

"So you're up," said Mephisto, touching his chest and nodding his head in an aristocratic bow. "It is good to see you in such fine

fettle. However, I wouldn't think you should want to come here so immediately after arising."

With a sideways glance at Setsura, the Demon Princess said, "Have you devised a means of saving Takako yet?"

The tip of a razor-sharp icicle traced a line down Setsura's back. If she'd read their intent already, the inevitable showdown might begin here and now.

However, without another word on the subject, she glided up to Mephisto and said, "There's something I would like you to heal."

"Anything," Mephisto nodded. He looked at Setsura. "Non-essential personnel should feel free to vacate the premises," he said in icy voice that left no choice for him but to leave.

Setsura turned toward the door without complaint. He'd be lying if he said he didn't have concerns. Mephisto and Princess were going to talk. Even if he'd okayed Setsura's proposal, there was no telling if that promise would be kept the moment after that. That's the kind of man he was.

But at least he'd said yes. Setsura should be happy with that.

Mephisto waited a minute after Setsura left the room. Looking at the door he said, "Do you want to make sure?" Make sure that Setsura wasn't spying on them, he meant.

"No. He has gone."

The Demon Princess understood everything that went on in her house. This was her world, after all.

“So what do you want?”

She did not readily answer the surprisingly abrupt question. The laboratory and its surrounding stone walls and arrays of strange instruments couldn’t help but bring to mind the aura bestowed by the ancient alchemists. The eerie blue light from the spinning, sparking dynamo played across their faces. The flame from the bronze lamp arose with the moves of a ribald dancer, the long shadows stretching out across the floor.

If a true picture of beauty could only be painted in dreams, then they were living in a dream. The figures of the pale man and woman facing each other absorbed the light and the darkness, casting their surroundings into drabness. Here was a living Bronze Age engraving of an Adonis and a Venus that deigned even to change the world.

“This is my task for you,” said the Venus.

At the sound of her voice, the world once again found its breath. She raised her hand and brushed back the hair covering half of her face. The scorched half of her face brought to Mephisto’s mind a name already consigned to the dust.

“The wound left by the Elder. This will be—difficult.”

Such a diagnosis by the Demon Physician would make any other patient faint dead away. *Difficult*. Had he ever uttered such words before? The shadows flickered across her face, casting the healthy half into shade, the burned half into light.

“Difficult things are by their nature difficult. But that also means they are not impossible. The only skill that eludes Doctor Mephisto

is bringing the dead back to life."

"True. Nevertheless, it will take time. And it will be painful. Like nothing you have experienced before in your life."

"Do you think I came here ignorant of that fact?"

"No. Pain, however, can change even the soul."

"So I shall become another person? How interesting. The sooner we start the better."

"I must first attend to other tasks."

"You may tend to them later."

"No doctor could push a previous patient to the side and hope to preserve his reputation."

"No?" the Demon Princess softly asked. Had any single word spilled from the lips of the ancient empresses in such an exquisite and prideful tone?

"I understand. In exchange, I shall need a particular compensation."

"Gold and jewels, the finest works of art in the world, my own flesh—I could tell you to take whatever you wish and yet I fear the Demon Physician would not spare me a second glance." She spoke in a whisper and fell silent. A shadow of what might even be called fear touched her features.

Mephisto smiled, turned ghostly by the flickering flame. But what the eye saw and the mind perceived as a smile could not be confidently called such, tinged as it was by something apart from the

human. Perhaps he was recalling the smile as the ancient scholar signed in blood the parchment on which the contract was written.

"There is but one thing I wish to ask you," he said. "Why do you want to be treated?"

"So you wish me to admit that I too am a woman?" The Demon Princess raised her hand to her mouth and smiled, a gesture that would have aroused any other human, male or female, to the breaking point. Such was this destroyer of worlds.

"You are correct," said Mephisto, betraying not even a smirk. "Though not according to the conventional definition."

"Hoh. And that would be?"

"I do not suppose that you desire beauty for its own sake?"

"And if I did, would you deride me as an ordinary woman? I won't allow it. However fearless the emperor, I do not remember one ever once laughing at me."

"Then perhaps I should not have asked the question," said Mephisto, though this was no less outrageous a statement. "Precisely. You desire beauty. But for whom?"

The only sound was the melancholic sputter of the flame consuming the oil in the lamp.

"For whom?" Princess echoed several long seconds later. She asked the question in an offhand manner, though hints of a forced naturalness were still there.

"Yes. Women are creatures who know no limits and no shame

when it comes to indulging themselves in the pursuit of beauty. But there are those rare occasions when she does it for someone else. Call it a redeeming feature of the fairer sex."

"Are you saying that I want my face healed for someone else? You still have something to learn when it comes to diagnosing the soul, if not the body. Though even that much would be useful to Kikiou. But tend to me first."

"There is still the matter of remuneration," Mephisto said without moving an eyebrow.

A fierce glare poured from Princess's eyes. "You would defy me in my own house, Mephisto? Not even the Demon Physician may do that."

"I only wish to hear your answer. A name. Princess, how many of your incarnations have spoken those words? Did Daji? Did Moxi?"

She didn't answer.

"Princess, when you invaded my hospital, why did not you not destroy him? Was it love?"

The dynamo spat electrical fire, casting a blue tint around the astounding question. Princess's eyes became blood-red rubies. The flasks and beakers shattered. Strange fluids splashed on the table and floor. The liquids mixed together and burst into a pool of flames. Burning rivulets spilled off the table onto the floor and fluttered around her ankles.

She took no notice even when the white sleeves of her *cheongsam* began to burn. The fire advanced on Mephisto's feet as

well. His cape glittered. He ignored the beaten-down flames and looked instead at the blazing beauty before him. The flames wrapped around her, making it appear as if the fierce fires of hell were bursting forth from her own body.

"You are correct."

Now with her hair consigned to the flames, the Demon Princess laughed. Her voice became glowing embers dancing toward the ceiling.

"I love Setsura Aki. As soon as I saw him lying on that bed in your hospital, I was captivated by his countenance. There was a beauty that I would trade the whole world for without regrets. Had he been but a beautiful man, I would not yearn for him so. Setsura Aki is a man I cannot fathom. I entrance neither of them—a fearsome enemy that desires only my death. And yet I was entranced."

Had such a terrifying love ever been so confessed in this world? Inside the conflagration that seemed to be incinerating her cells one by one, her voice blazed all the brighter and with infinite pathos. The fire eating her flesh was no less intense than the one kindling her emotions.

"I will take his soul, else these last four thousand years have been lived in vain. Sully that soul with otherworldly lusts, immerse it in a bloody lake of humiliation, and he will kneel at my feet. That will take time. It will take ingenuity. First of all, I must be the perfect woman. My beauty must transcend all others, enough to drive a man mad. That is why your medical care is required."

Her words flowed from a human-shaped fire. The floor burned.

The walls burned. The flames licked the ceiling. They left only the doctor in white alone, suggestive of Mephisto's existence itself.

"I agree." His voice carried over the growling volcano, as clear as the Arctic waters at the ends of the earth. "I have had my reward. In the name of Doctor Mephisto, your face shall be healed."

Chapter Two

Setsura was in a forest. The back of the manor house had a southern exposure. The sunlight streaming through the leaves and branches painted ribbons across the ground. He was perspiring after walking for thirty minutes. The sweat yielded to a cooling breeze that sprang up from time to time, suggesting that fall was waiting in the wings.

Strolling through the dappled sunlight, the melancholic solitude of the figure seemed to beckon the season.

What Mephisto and the Demon Princess were up to right now in their little assignation—he'd thought of leaving a few of his threads behind, but they were who they were and it'd be a waste of time from the start.

"A bit of them bad-mouthing me won't hurt anybody. But that'll hardly be the end of it. That man is impossible to get a handle on, especially now."

He'd probably be more cheesed off knowing that Mephisto was saying the same thing at the moment. Grumbling about the substance of their imagined conversations, Setsura suddenly came to a halt.

The forest parted into a clearing, revealing a pile of rubble. The remains of the collapsed roof and rotting pillars of an old wooden mansion.

"A palace from the Hsia or Shang Dynasties, eh?"

The wind whistled in response to his musings, sending a green wave through the overgrown grass. Perhaps here was where the Demon Princess drank wine with Emperor Zhou and indulged in the debaucheries of the Sumptuous Feast.

"Where the hell is this place?" Setsura wondered, casting his eyes around the clearing.

Light and shadow played across his cheeks. They were a whiter shade than pale, the complexion of an ill man. The *qi* in his gut was cold and heavy, sucking up his life spirit. And yet at times the sickly flower, assaulted by mold and bacteria and fetid water, was more beautiful than the blooming gardens of summer.

Poison flowed through the veins of this young man whose visage brought to mind a finely crafted but brittle glass. His falling shadow was losing its shape and definition.

Setsura suddenly noticed how tired he was. He had to sit down and think over what kind of world this was. An inclined square pillar in the shape of a bed was planted among the roots of a giant tree.

"Ah, just the thing," he said with dour cheer.

He stretched out on the stone pillar. When he thought about it, the only occasions he'd had time to rest these past few days was while being treated by the doll girl, and several hours when he was a prisoner of the Demon Princess in her manor house.

It hadn't been his intent to rest while in the enemy's clutches but he couldn't say he regretted it.

He felt the cool hard surface against his back. This was the real

thing. As were the overhanging leaves and branches. There was no other word for this world but reality. Beyond those blue mountains, the green hills and valleys probably went on and on.

But for the time being only two people called it home.

Yakou and Mephisto and Setsura were unwelcome guests. What did Princess and the others think of this tranquil, bountiful and endlessly lonely world? What sort of lives did they lead?

His thoughts slowly turned to warm mud and filled his head. His eyelids grew heavy. His right hand rested on his chest. His left arm hung down. He began to breathe the whisper-like breath of sleep.

A young man in black sleeping in the shade of a tree, patterned in light and shadow. In a sublime painting of the scenery, flowers would sing, the wind would reach out to touch him. Who knew that he was the lone warrior capable of saving the world from the evil influence of the vampires?

The body beneath the beautiful face was exhausted and the peaceful picture was in fact a blood-soaked battlefield in repose. A bird sang far away. A cloud scuttled through the blue sky. Time passed. But the sunlight evinced no signs of approaching darkness.

Here time never ended, and this war was an endless war. In a conflict where eternity would determine victory or defeat, who could say whether Setsura would triumph?

Wings flapped above his head. Like an unwelcome omen, the descending silhouette turned into Yakou.

“Get out of here,” Setsura said, not opening his eyes. He could

still be asleep.

“Sorry, but I’ve been appointed your watcher.” Yakou shrugged and folded his wings across his back.

“Tell me where the weapons are stored or get lost.” Setsura made the imperious demand in a sleep-voice.

“You want to blow this world up? Those mountains and that lake are real. You’re going to destroy them all by yourself?”

“You’re being awfully sardonic for a traitor.”

Once they were both prepared to rain down blood and fire on this place. Setsura had just entrusted Mephisto with the moon lilies from which the elixir could be extracted that would restore Yakou to normal. But for the time being, he’d be following Princess’s orders.

“C’mon. Don’t be like that. I would feel remiss if I failed to teach you about the true nature of this world.”

“That’s why I can’t stand these expat types. They all fancy themselves wandering Dutchmen, attached to no one country.”

Yakou didn’t take the dig personally. He stood on the root that held up the stone pillar. A gentle breeze floated between them, casting off a glitter and a fragrance where it brushed against the black slicker. He looked down languidly at Setsura, who still had his eyes closed and was breathing slowly, making no effort to scope out his enemy.

Even that strange fragrance could be sensed in the scene.

“Let me leave you with a warning,” said Yakou, as if

remembering something. There was no answer. “This is not a good place to sleep. Princess says you’re liable to dream bad dreams.”

“When’s the last time you took a nap?”

“Not ever.”

“Stop letting women tell you what to do. Now and then I become a dream. Don’t you want to see what sort of dream I become?”

Yakou shrugged. “Do as you please.”

“G’night,” Setsura said.

But the night didn’t come. Peals of laughter crystallized into the forms of women darting through the grove of trees. Naked. And naked men running after them in hot pursuit.

Setsura rapped his head with his knuckles. “A dream?”

Or rather, the nightmares Yakou had warned him about.

More laughter reached his ears. He glanced over his shoulder. Castle ramparts soared out of the pile of stones and rubble. Great numbers of men and women peeked out from the gates and drawbridges, their faces given over to the vulgar laughter, focusing on the object of their attention.

“You! Man in black! Get naked too!”

They spoke in Chinese, but the dream rendered the meaning clear.

“You women! What are you doing? Strip off his clothes!” ordered an official wearing the purple robes of high office.

The woman wove through the trees and darted toward Setsura. They must have already coupled with the men, for their bodies were flushed with arousal. Panting, lips wet, tongues lolling from their mouths, like bitches in heat they were ready to swoop down on any man they saw.

When Setsura came into view, they stopped in their tracks. At a certain point, physical beauty crossed all generations and all social contexts and psychological boundaries.

“Which idiot emperor is it this time?” Setsura asked from the stone slab.

“Kill him!” somebody barked.

Setsura saw a long, thin rod streaking through the air at him. Spears. The intent was to skewer him along with the women.

But something funny happened. An invisible hand gathered up the shower of spears in midair, turned it a hundred and eighty degrees, and rained them back in the direction from which they’d come.

The soldiers at the top of the ramparts screamed and ran for cover as the spears clattered down on the parapets and walls one after another.

“Archers! Fire!”

A second later, a cloud of arrows flew from the ramparts. And just as unbelievably, all were returned to sender.

“Not such a bad dream so far,” Setsura said, finally climbing

down from the rock. He stood up and turned around. Behind him was some sort of tank. The turret and wheels were painted bright red. The real problem was its source of propulsion—a long, crocodile-like creature crawling on all fours.

It opened its mouth wide. Its body shuddered. The oval scales glimmered in the broken sunlight, casting off a silver glow. But what set it apart from the normal animal kingdom was its thirty-foot length and the Fu Manchu mustache drooping from below its nostrils.

One of those legendary dragons.

The armored soldier riding it cracked a huge whip. The earth shook as the creature surged forward. According to the legends of the Shang and Hsia Dynasties—and further back into the mists of time—in one part of China lived dragons who, in exchange for gold, would level mountains and make the rain fall and contributed to the rise of civilization.

When the Hun attacked from the north they would retaliate without mercy, tearing the enemy asunder with their fangs, and breathing fire that burned them to crisps. Some were still left during the era of the Demon Princess. Or maybe this too was a dream.

The dragon reared up. Its torso was as wide as the outstretched arms of two men. Its chest swelled. With a roaring sound, it sucked in a great volume of air, inhaling the leaves of the trees and clouds of dirt and dust. The branches bent like twigs.

In a flash, Setsura was a black shadow soaring into the sky.

The inward rushing of air changed as quickly into an outrushing hurricane. The legend of fire-breathing dragons turned from dream into reality.

The column of violet flame first mowed down the stands of trees. The women were sent flying to their instantaneous deaths as their bodies *thudded* into the trunks of the trees and the stone walls of the ramparts. Death as merciful as could be hoped for, perhaps.

The dancing inferno burned the flesh like tissue paper in a kiln, and turned the bones to dust.

Setsura lashed his devil wire around a branch and soared upwards. The earth and the undergrowth and the castle walls themselves seemed to be spitting fire.

The blast flung the men and women from the castle walls. The whip cracked again. The giant dragon wheeled around and fixed its golden eyes on them. Blue teardrops filled its eyes, then gushed out in a torrent. The frothing tide swept inside the castle, catching the onlookers up in the roaring currents.

The tank's driver roared with laughter. To a dragon rider, the grisly fates of ordinary folk was all comic relief. His attention now turned toward the grove of trees where his target must have hidden himself.

The flooded castle rocked and trembled and the water poured forth.

"Hah!" The dragon rider kicked against one of the scales. The dragon stamped its feet and bounded into the sky. Whether the

powers of flight were contained within the dragon, or whether it was equally mysterious to the driver, all that mattered now was that it could fly.

Strange as it may seem, he'd noticed as well that everything in this world, including himself, was somebody else's dream. Perhaps he was driven by a curiosity about what would become of an enemy vanquished in a dream.

The dragon glided lazily through the burning trees. Charred branches and stumps crumbled at the touch of the driver's whip. Calculating the arc, he traced a line in the air before them. With a slight shiver, the dragon's neck lowered, and the fire burst forth at the optimal angle.

The flames descended like a red stream of water. A mile ahead, the crimson wall engulfed the spot the driver had calculated, at the precise point along the path that Setsura had taken.

The driver brought the beast to a halt several seconds later. Among the trees were large stone statues, the work of some previous generation of craftsmen the driver knew nothing about.

They were over thirty feet tall. The dragon banked and approached a statue of a soldier wearing a different kind of armor than what the dragon rider wore. It was cracked and eroded, shot through with fissures. A particularly large crevice ran vertically through the waist, large enough to hold a man.

The driver tried a different approach this time. He kicked against a different scale. The dragon wrapped around the statue like a thick strand of leather. In an instant, its body began to heat, baking the

rock. The hard granite took only ten seconds to crumble and pour out of the crevice like sand.

As its body cooked the stone, the dragon's feet scraped at it like chisels. The rock turned to ashes and the ashes turned to dust. Anybody hiding inside would regret the decision as his bones turned to charcoal.

Praising the dragon's fine nose for prey, the driver wheeled around the way they had come. The driver's armor and the tank's paint protected him from the dragon's own fierce heat. The dragon lifted its head and looked at the trees to its right.

A stab of fear went through the driver's chest just as the dragon's neck separated at its shoulders, not completely but halfway through.

A fountain of blood whooshed upwards. The scarlet liquid, boiling with latent heat, splashed down on the creature's extremities, sending up a curtain of steam and smoke.

The dragon writhed. Perhaps because of the scales, the invisible blade dug in deeper, opening the wound wider, tormenting the magical beast with the pains of hell. As the turret bobbed like a small boat driven before a tsunami, the driver peeled his eyes for any sign of the weapon or its wielder.

The dragon's feet struck the earth, and ripped the trees asunder. A mist of blood shrouded the world. The driver lost control and was flung from the turret just as the titanium threads severed the legendary creature's neck. The scales scattered through the air like gold-plated snowflakes.

Setsura observed the torso writhing in its death agonies from a large tree. He stepped out on a big branch. “Helluva dream,” he said.

“That’s for sure.”

Recognizing Yakou’s voice, Setsura opened his eyes.

Yakou said, “I warned you. What happened to your coat?”

Setsura looked suspiciously at Yakou’s face and touched his chest. He was the same as when he fell asleep, except his slicker was gone.

“You?”

“Don’t start casting aspersions,” said Yakou, rather testily. “Maybe you took it off?”

Setsura cocked his head to the side. “That’s right. In order to deceive the dragon’s sense of smell, I left it in the statue. It must have gotten burned up. In the dream, at least.”

“A dream dreamed in Princess’s world.”

“Can’t a fellow get a good night’s sleep? Without a little Harry in your pocket?

“What’s that?”

“Old school magicians of a sort. What you Limeys call a Subway Sam.”

“I see,” Yakou said with a grin.

His face transformed into the dragon rider’s. His arm flashed down and buried the short sword into Setsura’s throat. The white-hot

pain strangled the erupting scream and woke Setsura from his sleep.

A brown shaft was jabbed into his throat.

“Looks like you were having a nightmare,” Yakou said, coolly casting aside the tree branch in his hand.

“Still playing games, dragon rider?”

“Who’s that?”

“Can you prove to me this isn’t a dream?”

Yakou pretended not to understand. “It is all a dream. Don’t you think?”

“I guess so.”

Setsura sat up. He was still wearing his slicker. “How long was I asleep?”

“About a minute.”

“A long nap, that.”

Just then a woman’s scream rent the air.

Chapter Three

Yakou whirled around. He hadn't seen that coming either.

"What's going on?" Setsura asked.

"I don't know. Let's find out."

"Not an acquaintance?" Setsura wondered wryly.

"Princess's sentries are apparently useless at keeping strangers from stomping in uninvited whenever they feel like it. If you don't want to know, you're welcome to stay right here."

Another unearthly scream pounded against their eardrums, that could only be the product of some unimaginably awful fate. With a low groan, Yakou's wings unfolded from his back, flapping as soon as they achieved their full span.

Rising upwards in a swirl of air, Yakou looked down and said, "So, you decided to come along for the ride."

"Seems so," said Setsura, dangling from one of his ankles.

The scream came from the woods not a dozen yards away. The forest around them formed a dense maze of trees and underbrush that would make swift progress on foot difficult. And intruders could be detected from the air far more easily.

Yakou came to a halt. He glanced at the sky and clouds above, and then again down at the ground. "I haven't seen that before."

He indicated the island in the sea of dense woodland, an open space that could only be manmade. In the clearing unfolded a barbaric scene.

Several dozen stakes were planted around the perimeter of the clearing. Naked men and women were tied to them. In the center, two rows of wide columns enclosed a separate area that contained a good twenty beds. On each bed, her hands and feet tied to the bed posts, was the writhing body of a naked woman.

Men dressed in medieval outfits, two to a bed, stared down at the swollen bellies with odious eyes. The women were all pregnant.

Strange creatures poured into the clearing from the surrounding forest. A giant woman with multiple eyes and bug-like appendages here, a human-like ghost straight out of an old picture scroll there. Snake heads, lobster claws for hands, the feet and tails of lions—these chimeras might have otherwise engendered more laughter than fear.

Flinging mucus with every step, the grotesque monsters sprang at the men and women tied to the stakes. Their fangs tore into the flesh, their claws split the bellies in two and stuffed the arms and legs into their spider-like mouths. It was simultaneously a scene straight out of hell and a fantasy of the absurd.

And yet none of them beseeched the two in the sky above for help. Yakou doing nothing was understandable, but that Setsura cast down not a single strand of devil wire was certainly strange.

But the bodies lashed to the stakes would be consumed in an instant. And all that time, protected from the monsters by the rings

of pillars, a far worse atrocity was going on.

The men in ancient dress took swords shaped like hatchets. One after the other they split open the women's stomachs and from spasming abdominal cavities extracted the bloody fetuses.

Setsura understood. This was an historical reenactment. The atrocity Daji had beseeched Emperor Zhou to commit—to open the bellies of pregnant women, tear out the babies, and examine them with the naked eye.

He heard faraway laughter, resonating as if the mountains themselves were chortling. Yakou placed his hands over his ears. That broke the rhythm of his flight and like a beautiful pair of Siamese twins they plummeted to earth.

Setsura's eyes fluttered and opened. Yakou was slumped against his left shoulder. He came around a minute later. "Do me a favor, okay? Don't ask me if this is a dream too."

So Yakou had somehow been dreaming the same dream as Setsura.

"Is this a dream too?" Setsura asked anyway.

Even if this world was the reality, without any way of proving otherwise, there was no telling how long it would go on. It was impossible for them to distinguish between the one and the other. Yakou didn't answer. Setsura didn't expect him to.

"Why did you dream that dream as well?"

"I don't know."

It was hard to imagine a power that could ensnare Setsura and Yakou—shamans of unsurpassed powers—in the same nightmare.

"Must have been that scream."

"Probably."

Setsura mused, “That was the voice of the Princess you’re crushing on. You’d better hurry on back. Something must be up.”

“I was told to keep an eye on you. You and she could be exchanging your deathbed farewells and I’m not to leave your side.”

“I don’t get you. Loosen up a bit. You don’t need to be so anal about everything.”

“In the middle of filling a specialty order for a favored customer, would you just pop off to a movie with that shop girl of yours?”

“What are you bringing her up for?” Setsura said a bit testily. “Well, whatever. I’m curious, too. Let’s check it out.”

He strode off toward the manor house. Stepping into the front foyer, the two of them stopped and exchanged glances. A moaning like nothing else in the world reverberated down the hallway, a sound like the loathing and resentment of hungry ghosts writhing in the depths of hell. A sound that would send the heartiest hero fleeing, his hands clapped to his ears, screaming.

Setsura furrowed his brows. Yakou turned his eyes toward the heavens as the sound went on and on without respite. What they’d heard earlier outside—what summoned the nightmare—wrenched the strange living force of this world to the breaking point, responding to the tremors in Princess’s mind and soul.

“Your mistress must be suffering,” Setsura said in a hinting manner, thinking maybe he’d hang out here in the hall for a while. Outsiders probably wouldn’t be welcome.

Yakou was clearly beside himself. His hesitancy already had

made him a prisoner of impatience. Setsura started off toward the sound of the voice, if only to see for himself what was going on. It was coming from underground, surely from the direction of Mephisto's laboratory.

Except that he finally found Mephisto in a room a good distance removed from the one where they'd last met. It wasn't locked. The screams grew louder and louder.

"Hello, everybody," Setsura called out in a tired voice and pushed open the door. He didn't knock.

His eyes were dazzled by a rainbow splash of vibrant colors. Another example of the strange wonders the manor house held. A flower garden. The gorgeous flowers—not one of which Setsura recognized—covered the ground and reached out to infinity.

Pretty flowers. Flowers with large and poisonous petals. Brilliant sunlight poured in from an unseen skylight. Although each of them must be emitting its own unique scent, a single bittersweet aroma—and a quite likable one—enshrouded them.

But Setsura hadn't sensed that yet. His defensive instincts on high alert, he'd held his breath since opening the door.

"It's Mephisto," said Yakou.

Apparently the odor had no effect on vampires. Or it wasn't poisonous in the first place.

"Princess won't forgive anybody acting up in front of her, be you the devil himself."

Setsura didn't say so, but this sounded a whole lot worse than a little "acting up." He said, "Over there."

Dimly visible in the direction he was pointing was a mound shaped like a person. "What room is this?" Setsura asked in a muffled voice as they hurried along.

"I'm not sure, but it seems to contain a collection of medicinal plants. They're said to be poisonous."

The startled Setsura replied, "You know a lot for not really knowing anything."

They stopped at the sight of the crouching form of Princess's body. Yakou placed his hand over his mouth and nose. This child of the night had sensed something amiss, a shift in the fragrance, to a strange and awful smell.

Setsura saw the cause at his feet. Every flower within a sixty-foot radius around the Demon Princess had rotted, wilted and drooped. The petals and stems altered their colors, covered themselves in a weird viscous fluid, and transformed into a different kind of corrupted strangeness.

All because of Princess's agonies.

"Princess!" Yakou called out. "What has happened to you?"

She didn't answer.

Yakou ran up to her, the soles of his shoes scattering the corruption of this inner sanctuary.

The cries of pain changed to a sound no one could have believed

this sorceress could make—the sound of a woman weeping. But listening impassively, Setsura's eyes flashed with a terrible light. She wasn't crying—no, the Demon Princess was laughing. She slowly got to her feet, her white figure as pretty as it was dreadful. Her laughter grew louder.

"Princess—"

"Look at me!" she declared, a proclamation suffused with joy and evil. "I am back!"

She turned her face toward them. The other half was not covered with a sheen of black hair. Without prompting, Setsura's mind returned to that summer night, that clear summer night when she sailed on a black ship down flooded streets into this city.

From that cool crisp night to the bloody, tragic night before, she was the utterly unbecoming and perfectly appropriate creature. There was not a line, a stain, a smudge left on her face.

"Just what I would expect from the Demon Physician." Princess's voice flowed on the beams of light. "I am back, at last. Look, one and all. Setsura Aki, this is my true face."

"Good for you," Setsura said, not even cracking a smile. "Though not the kind of face you'd want to face the world with."

A brief moment of disquiet flickered across her bright countenance. Something sliced through the gloom and with a bright *ping!* ricocheted away. The shuriken embedded itself in the ground at Yakou's feet.

"Princess shall not be disrespected!" Yakou growled, baring his

fangs.

"Enough already. There'll be no killing him." Princess smiled pleasantly. "I have not attended to his punishment and an assortment of other minor tasks because of my concern for my face. But that grief is behind me already. Setsura, I who toy with the nations of the earth and leave them in the dust will consign you to the hell of my lusts."

Setsura closed his eyes. "Oh, for Pete's sake," he said, though a faint line of tension did run through his words. "Though I wouldn't let my guard down if I were you."

"Why would that be?"

"That doctor in the white cape healed you, did he not? If you harbored no doubts that he was truly your colleague, then you could be assured that his treatment would be similarly perfect. But you do harbor those doubts. And for that matter, I would not be so certain about *him* either."

There was no other man in the world who would address the Demon Princess so frankly or cast aspersions on Doctor Mephisto so casually.

The expected retort was quick in coming. "Don't be so glib." The white figure glided up behind him.

"How perfect was your treatment?" Setsura asked, without a glance over his shoulder. "There is no way even Doctor Mephisto could treat the infamous Daji in two or three hours and not leave a scar on her fair skin."

“I wouldn’t deny it,” Mephisto said. “But the patient desired speed more than perfection.”

“So the customer is always right, eh?”

Mephisto ignored the jibe.

“I have heard there is a particular side effect,” said Princess, touching her face. “But whatever will be, will be. I shall make use of the Demon Physician’s services again. Hoh, adding you to our little gang came with quite the package of benefits.”

Then she looked long and hard at Setsura.

“The time has come, Setsura,” she declared. “I will torment your body and spirit, down to your heart and soul. After tonight, you will never sleep again.”

Part Six: The Devil vs. the General

Chapter One

That day in Shinjuku, many more of its citizens than usual cursed the coming night.

Thanks to a nonstop and effective social engineering PR campaign—on the streets and in the shops, a sharply dressed man or woman might casually observe that violent vampires had been seen roaming the streets after sundown, sucking blood without regard to age or class or decorum—the countermeasures were already moving into high gear.

Over two thousand incidents were phoned into the ward's crime prevention unit. At the grocery stores and supermarkets, the price of peaches and locks rose a hundredfold and still sold out.

Families went shopping together for lumber to make stakes or raided abandoned lots for spare scraps of wood. The resourceful block leaders of Kikuicho and Bentencho created a distribution system, equipping lumber dealers and home centers with lathes to turn out stakes. Everybody in their blocks—from the oldest centenarian to the hour-old baby—was presented with three each.

At the same time, the neighborhood watch committees set up barricades at the block perimeters, got electrical generators from community centers and charged the cyclone fencing. When the sun went down, they started up the patrols, armed with flame throwers and incendiary grenades.

The residents of blocks lacking that kind of strong-armed leadership built their houses into single-walled estates and waited behind multiple layers of locks and bolts for the dawn to break.

Fortunately, when panic did break out in parts of Naitomachi and Haramachi, it didn't burn out of control.

The citizens of the city took it in stride. When it came to the threat of the "other," they had a different way of thinking than outsiders. The greatest fear of the vampires—and on this point there was wide agreement among the general public—was not being drained of blood to the point of death.

But to die and yet live to seek the lifeblood of others.

Whether all that disagreeable or not, it was a fact that a person had to "die" before becoming a vampire. They would come back to life, fearing the light and with a lust for human blood. This could be called a new life.

Instead of the vampire's fangs, what about a carbon steel knife stabbed into the jugular? Or a .45 round from a gangbanger's gun in the gut?

And then there were the "regular" monsters. Headhunters with a taste for fresh heads. Packs of ghouls wandering from their home ground in the ruins. One of those flying, squid-like monsters that could swoop down on a person like a hawk snatching up a prairie dog. A shapeshifter who could appear at the door, only showing its true form after passing through the threshold.

Which alternative would the attacked prefer? A "clean" death? Or

a cursed life? According to a poll conducted by a private supernatural research laboratory, sixty percent of Shinjuku's residents chose the former.

So even this night, feeling the tension but no overwhelming fear, the vast majority readied themselves for whatever creatures of the night might appear.

The Shinjuku police helicopter landed on the roof of the ward government building. Mayor Kajiwara climbed aboard.

The large aircraft carried a crew of ten during night patrols. It was armed with a 20 mm Vulcan Gatling gun, AAR 70 mm air-to-ground missiles in two nineteen-round, rapid-fire pods, and a 30 mm laser cannon. Compared to similar models outside Shinjuku, it was a veritable killing machine. In this city, it was considered lightly armed. The pilot and crew had already asked for heavier weaponry.

Kajiwara was joining a regular night patrol. He was there to boost troop morale and foster goodwill with the local television reporters he'd brought along. But there was one other important reason he wasn't sharing with anybody.

Including the cameraman and pilot, there were already nine on board. Kajiwara stepped onto the deck and then off again. He turned to his security chief. "You've screened everybody, right?"

"Yes, sir. No problems, sir."

Assured by the security chief's confident declaration, he stepped forward. But just to make sure, he asked again, "How did you run the checks?"

“With a crucifix.”

“And that means we have nothing to worry about.”

“I appreciate the compliment, sir.”

“Then you’re relieved of duty.”

“Sir?”

“First tell everybody to line up. Show them this.”

He took a peach from the pocket of his jacket. After an internal struggle—pride warring between the rock and a hard place of social position—the security chief took it. With grim resolve, he relayed the mayor’s command to the guards behind him. As the crew lined up, the disagreeable expression was plain on his face.

“One, okay. Two, okay. Three, okay.” And down the line. Last were the cameraman and the pilot. The guard brushed the peach against the cameraman’s nose. “Okay,” he said over his shoulder.

Behind him the pilot threw his head backwards. And when his face popped back it was a gruesome sight.

“Hit him with the peach!” Kajiwara cried.

The pilot seized the startled guard by the shoulders, holding him rigid as he brought his pallid face to the man’s neck.

One of the cops jumped forward. Drawing his Magnum from his hip holster, he pressed it into the pilot’s side and pulled the trigger. That he didn’t try pulling them apart first reflected his training as a Demon City cop.

As the hollow point bullet tore through his insides, the pilot threw a roundhouse with his right arm. Kajiwara watched as the blow broke the cop's jaw and sent him flying, and then stepped forward himself.

"Mayor!"

Kajiwara plucked the peach from the guard's trembling hand and fearlessly jammed it into the pilot's face, right beneath the rim of his helmet.

The pilot raised his head and bellowed. The landing lights of the helipad lit up the pair of scarlet lines falling from his mouth. Dripping juice and pieces of fruit clinging to the side of his face, the pilot backed away, his hand pressed against his cheek.

"Quarantine him! Don't kill him! He's a citizen of this city!"

If any of them harbored doubts about the authority of the office of mayor in Shinjuku, then surely Kajiwara settled them then and now. None of the itching trigger fingers pulled the rest of the way.

"Thank you!"

The guard staggered, his hand clamped against his neck. As Kajiwara grabbed him by the collar and pushed him back toward his comrades, he couldn't help smiling to himself. He'd raised his credibility considerably since stepping onto the helicopter.

He body-checked the vampire pilot. The flesh beneath the uniform squirmed like a bag of eels and the pilot screamed. Kajiwara pushed the pilot aside and the rest of the cops were on him.

As they hauled him and the injured guard away, Kajiwara called out, “Hey, if you want to keep him in lockup, fine. Just make sure there are peaches at the exits.”

“I understand,” Galeen Nuvenberg said into the phone, and then returned it to the table. She rubbed her fingers on the armrest as if to wipe away the plastic feel. It was a sensation she couldn’t accustom herself to. She’d much prefer handling snakes or leeches.

She’d spoken for hardly a minute, and yet the fatigue creeping through her body was like that at the end of a long trip. Her cousin in Prague was insisting that she come to her granddaughter’s wedding. That was the least of her concerns these days, and so she had refused. The “granddaughter” was eighty-four. And her suitor was a young man of twenty-five.

Nuvenberg warned her about casting spells and tried to hang up, but there was no way she could stop casting them *now*. She just wanted to borrow some magic to make sure everything got settled with nobody seeing through the fifty-year facade.

She couldn’t think up a good answer, so that’s how she ended the call. It was a five-year ritual. Who knew if she’d live that long, or even survive the current troubles.

Her stomach felt like she’d swallowed a couple pounds of lead. This was the first time she’d experienced such a troublesome *qi*. Driving a stake through the heart of the man who’d left it there hadn’t removed it. She’d have to resort to other methods.

The motorized wheelchair hummed down the hall, through a door and into a narrow corridor. Doorways lined the walls on either side.

An infinite number of strange paths opened up behind each one.

Passing through one on the left, a familiar face greeted the old witch. Lying on the workbench was the young girl dressed in blue, an expressionless look on her face that her own world could barely comprehend.

The black bullet holes in her chest and forehead were a little shy of a half-inch in diameter. But there was still nothing inside. Using the tools scattered around the doll girl, Nuvenberg connected the glass blood vessels. All that was left to do was fill her with blood.

"I'm going to have to ask you to make a quick revival," she said, repressing a stab of pain in her abdomen. "This is one load I cannot carry on my own. I am hardly in better condition than you. That man's demon *qi* is a fine piece of work."

She was still complaining when a hard knock came at the front door. The reverberations were much stronger than could be expected from even a normal house.

"What's that? What a racket."

She ignored it at first. But her senses were drawn toward the sound. The wizardess awkwardly maneuvered the wheelchair over to a cauldron in the corner of the room filled with water. She plunged her forefinger into the water. The small ripples spread out. In the center of them appeared the face of a man.

"What in the world!" she exclaimed, as if being greeted by the appearance of a long-lost acquaintance or relation.

The one arm of the man in dark Chinese dress hung limply by his

side. The heroic features bathed in moonlight were none other than those of General Ryuuki.

Three minutes later the two were face to face in the front foyer. “A strange man has come to my strange house. I have to admit I am a bit curious. Clearly a stake alone won’t do the trick.”

“That is a question not even I can answer for certain,” Ryuuki said. He shook his head. “The power comes from Princess. Though I would think that was something Galeen Nuvenberg could overcome.”

“Another curiosity. We may both be overestimating each other.”

“If you lacked the confidence to destroy me, you would not have allowed me into your house.”

The slight smile that rose to his mouth was mirrored by the one on the old woman’s lips. “Did you come here for something other than conversation? Perhaps you wanted me to finish you off for good?”

Ryuuki nodded. “Precisely.”

This man had pushed back the invading barbarians in the lands of the north. But now his stouthearted features bore the marks of a sorrow and fatigue he wished wiped away.

“I have abandoned Princess. I have already taken the blood of another, because I could not stand living in exchange for Princess’s favor as the sole reward. She does not fear eternity. She is content with simply being alive. But not me. The life I am living now is not my own. I once believed that I could live my own life in this city. But I see that is not to be.”

“Aren’t you jumping to a hasty conclusion?”

“Prague’s greatest witch should listen to what I have to say. The night you plunged the stake into my chest, I drank the blood of the girl who pulled it out. The same girl who had given me shelter in her home.”

Nuvenberg closed her eyes and drew a long breath. “What became of her?”

“Afterwards I killed her. To be honest, I cannot say whether that was the right thing to do or not.”

“In this city, vampires are not necessarily loathed simply for being vampires.”

“There are vampires who loathe themselves for being vampires.”

“Do you find living as a vampire so loathsome? This city is home to all kinds.”

“And how many of those kinds attack innocent children?”

Nuvenberg didn’t answer.

“And tasting the hunger for blood, would rip out the throat of his own child?”

Again, no answer.

“I would. And those whose blood I have taken would. This is the eternal reward that I inherited from Princess. Moreover, for every ten victims, there is no inclination to make even one of them one of us.”

“Really? And when you do?”

“They kill and lap up the blood. Until only the rotting corpse remains. This is not bloodsucking. This is work of brutal murderers.”

“And when you are the sire, are those your spawn? And their victims?”

“The same.”

“And does the same apply to you?”

“It does.”

“Even so, this city may accept you yet. For a man on the run, there are plenty of places where you could hope to at least survive.”

Ryuuki smiled. “Perhaps. But I am tired—living like this, killing every night, drinking the blood of the innocent. I could not find forgiveness for that within myself.”

“You are a man of the old school.” Nuvenberg laced her wrinkled fingers together. “But I agree. I will give you the death you desire. You and that dust woman who dances around you. But there will be a fee.”

“Would jewels be acceptable?”

“No.”

“I have no other means to pay you.”

“Old school to the end. This is the information age.”

Ryuuki’s eyes narrowed.

“All this morning I have been divining a man’s fate. All by

himself, this brave warrior has taken on the likes of Princess and you. But his future does not look bright. Great calamities await him. One way or another, I must take action. He is surrounded on all sides by traitors and turncoats. Which is why I would appreciate directions to your mistress's hideout."

"I cannot do that."

"Then there is nothing more I can do for you."

"She saved my life. Even though my existence was cursed in the process, I remain grateful. I cannot betray her, even to secure my release."

"A man cannot serve two masters," Nuvenberg said coldly. "Choose me or her. Then we can talk."

Ryuuki shut his eyes. The comet trails of dust swirled around him.

"My, my. She's upset with me. I do not know who you are, but dust to dust and she continues to protect you. What a terrible and tragic burden of karma to carry—it must be a woman."

"Her name is Shuuran," said Ryuuki, opening his eyes.

"Then pardon me, Shuuran. But I must have an answer."

"Please forgive me intruding on you like this."

"Will you be leaving then?"

For this general, perhaps it was better to live accursed than die a betrayer.

“I do not know how, but I will seek out my own end.”

“Wait,” Nuvenberg called out, glancing out the window.

The street lamps in Takada no Baba’s Magic Town were gas-lit. A horde of shadows seemed to be scurrying beneath them, coming this way. They sprouted arms and legs and drew close to the window, pressing their faces against the glass.

The faces of young men and women. Though they looked human, their dreadful and vile expressions were anything but. Like ravenous wolves, they opened mouths to reveal fangs dripping with drool.

Chapter Two

The old witch said, “It looks like your friends decided to pay us a visit.”

The glass shattered. The sound echoed down the street. She said to the shadows clambering through the window frame, “You really did pick the wrong house to break into.”

She stretched out her right hand. It disappeared into the blackness down to her wrist, and then erupted from the back of the invading shadow, sending blood and shards of flesh flying.

Three more were blown away in succession. The ones still outside beat a quick retreat. The hearts of the fallen vampires had exploded out their backs, as if Nuvenberg’s hand had done its damage from the inside out.

The other shadows bent over the fallen bodies like wild beasts.

“Behold your comrades!”

General Ryuuki looked at where the old woman was pointing. They were already upon their erstwhile accomplices, sinking their fangs into their necks and arms and slurping up the blood. One lifted her head. A five-year-old girl, her lips smeared with blood.

Ryuuki stood there like a statue.

“Don’t forget. They too have a right to live in this city. However, inflict harm upon another and it will be returned with interest. That

also is the law here."

"I do not disagree. But I cannot countenance what I created, nor what they will spawn. I will pay the price."

"Well, I'll be." Nuvenberg nodded several times.

"However, if Setsura has already gone in, then Kikiou will have surely sealed the exits. A new entranceway must be found."

"And when would be convenient for you?" Nuvenberg asked, sending two more shadows flying from the window.

"That world must be connected to this one. They cannot only exist *there*. There must always be a *here*. To the extent that Princess does not impinge upon my powers, I should be able to uncover its whereabouts."

"Then the faster we get started, the better our odds," said the old woman, casting a withering glance at the shadows squirming outside her window.

A ghastly light erupted in the street. The vampires screamed. Bolts of lightning stabbed through them. They had picked the worst place in the city to party that night. This was Magic Town.

"If you wouldn't mind, my assistant is still in the shop. I'd appreciate a push."

She took her hand off the joystick and tapped on the grips. Hard to believe that General Ryuuki should be reduced to a wheelchair attendant.

They took a taxi from Waseda Boulevard to Chuo Park. Vampires

were on the prowl there too, but they had an almost medieval respect for class and stature.

This was Ryuuki, after all. He had once incurred the displeasure of the emperor and been dispatched to the far north. Rather than curse his fate, the gallant warrior quietly bore up under the hardships of defending the capital. When he stood before the creatures who roamed the night, that spirit still shone forth.

Hungering for blood, gnashing their teeth, these vampires—who would just as soon drink the blood of the monster next to them—shuddered with horror and slunk away. Ryuuki didn't move a finger. He simply was. And the monsters parted to the left and the right, clearing a safe path for him.

"I'm impressed," said the driver. "You can run them critters over and not leave a scratch on them. And you push them aside just like that. You wouldn't be on good terms with the Toyama Elder or Doctor Mephisto, perhaps?

"Not exactly, but neither are you far wrong with that supposition," answered Nuvenberg. "However, do you regularly drive where the likes of them are thick on the ground? We didn't come across any other taxis."

Just as the lights of a privately-owned cab sped by.

"Naw," said the driver. "There's plenty about. You can't be afraid of the dark and monsters and such and call yourself a Demon City cabbie. I'll drive around Chuo Park at midnight and cruise the Imperial Gardens to boot. Hey, there's one."

The pale form of a woman rose up in the light of the headlamps at the side of the road. “That’s a ghost,” the cabbie said, passing by without a second glance. “Got no time for her tonight. But on days when the fares are few, I’ll give ’em a ride, crazy as it sounds. A ghost that can hail a taxi will always figure out a way to pay.”

Such legends and folklore were not only the province of Demon City, but the capital as well.

A famous example was the cabbie who picked up a wan, pale girl near a graveyard and took her home. He waited while she went inside to get the fare. But she never came out again. When the cabbie went to the door, he was told that this was the anniversary of the girl’s untimely death.

But one of many variations of taxi folklore.

When it came to Demon City, they were of an order of magnitude more than where that one came from. Every night, dozens emerged from the ruins and appeared along the roadways begging passing taxis to take them home. The record for a single night stood at a hundred and seven.

No Demon City cabbie could afford to be afraid of ghosts. When it came to things not of this world, veteran hacks were more trustworthy authorities than mediums and psychics.

They believed they had a religious duty to return individual spirits to their homes. Furthermore, they’d bring any evidence left by the departed in their cabs—jewelry and watches they were wearing at the time of death—to the family members, who were sure to overpay the fare or offer them a little something on the side as a

reward.

This was only heaven smiling down on them, and they were all the more likely to cruise the graveyards and ruins by choice rather than as a last recourse.

In Shinjuku at night, just about anything was likely to pop up at any time. Protecting themselves from the thieves and mad killers and shapeshifters required a generous collection of talismans, guns, and other assorted magic items and weaponry.

Right now, hanging over the cabbie's head was a gold and silver chain with at least a dozen charms. Some added holy water to the windshield wiper fluid. In the corner of every cab company was sure to be an altar for every faith, and a dispensary with amulets, Christian crosses, holy water and rosaries for sale.

Most important of all was the sheet of high polymer plastic separating the front and back seats.

They saw gangs of vampires here and there battling it out with neighborhood watches and night shift cops. The driver didn't show any sign of concern as he turned onto Juniso Avenue and pulled up to the back entrance of Chuo Park a little after eight o'clock p.m. There wasn't a soul in sight.

"You really want to get out here?"

Nuvenberg tipped the incredulous cabbie and said, "Thank you for the ride. If it breaks down, I'd recommend you stay inside till morning." She got out and the taxi took off. "Here?" she asked Ryuuki, because Setsura had gone in on the side facing the Park

Hyatt Hotel.

"The new entranceway is close to here."

Ryuuki paced several yards to the shoulder of the Koshu Highway, stood there and closed his eyes for several seconds. Then without a word he approached the high fence that enclosed the park. Nuvenberg followed him in her wheelchair.

The air suddenly grew cold. The evil spirits came at them like a hard winter wind. They couldn't retreat, but had to turn and lean into the demonic gale.

There on the corner of Juniso Avenue was the large Romanesque frame of the man. The only one who possessed such a wicked aura.

"What an unexpected meeting," said Kazikli Bey.

"Where are you going?" Ryuuki asked.

"I should ask the same question of you." The general's eyes burned like a pair of fiery torches.

"Looks like the same place," Nuvenberg muttered to herself. A voice to make the blood run cold. A spirit willing to do what it took to get things done. "Isn't that so, Bey?"

"And if it was?"

He approached them with large strides. His right eye was a black pit, the scar left behind by Princess's stake. It had penetrated to his brain, but here he was in fine fettle. Needless to say, evidence of what an impressive member of the species this vampire lord was. Though perhaps the more fearsome conclusion was that, despite his

greatness, the wound inflicted by Princess had still not completely healed.

Ryuuki and the old woman didn't move.

"However it pains me to admit it, I am possessed by memories I cannot extinguish. And the source of them resides in that manor house. General Kazikli Bey has never let the object of his desires slip through his fingers."

Ryuuki's entire frame dimmed behind a veil of swirling dust.

"And her name is Takako."

Challenging that soft answer, General Bey's harsh voice demanded, "So you know her? How is that?"

"Princess told me once, around a hundred years ago. Your wife threw herself from the top of your mountain castle. Princess also has the portrait you painted many years later. The image of a small woman from the Far East. I can see the resemblance."

Visible in the moonlight, the expression that passed across General Bey's face was one of undeniable grief. But a moment later, he threw his head back and roared with laughter, laughter that seemed to shake the earth.

"Well, fine. As long as you know why I'm here, know as well that I cannot allow you to return to that kingdom."

He laced his fingers together—the fingers of a pianist—and bent them backwards, cracking the knuckles. With the humming of an electric motor, Nuvenberg backed the wheelchair off the sidewalk

and onto the roadway, the path of the wheelchair tracing a wide arc on the blacktop.

General Bey stood still. He noticed that his fighting potential was being divided in two. Not to mention that Ryuuki and the old woman were hardly forces to be trifled with in the first place.

Bey furrowed his brow and said to the old woman in the wheelchair, “Have we met somewhere before?”

“This all does seem familiar,” Nuvenberg muttered.

At the same time, a glimmer of light spilled from her lips onto the road. Spit, General Bey realized. Something arose from it like a wave of heat off of hot pavement. It resembled an indistinct cloud of insects. They swarmed over General Bey.

A haze of blood erupted from his body. “Sons of bitches!” he roared, flailing at the enemy. Small holes opened in his arms. They multiplied and grew larger. And became gaping pits. A chunk of his head disintegrated. A shoulder caved in. He was being eaten alive.

The demon lord that had once defeated Setsura, that even Princess feared, was being devoured and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Nuvenberg’s swarm had turned into a formless cannibal.

In the year 1800, one Henry Durbin published a monograph titled, *A narrative of some extraordinary things that happened to Mr. Richard Giles’s children*. According to the account, the children were strangled by unseen forces, not only beaten and bludgeoned but bitten more than two dozen times. The bite marks were triangular in

shape and deep enough to strike the bone. The adults who'd witnessed the atrocity said that even when they restrained their arms, the invisible assailants left marks beneath their hands.

Nuvenberg had conjured similar monsters out of her spit.

General Bey's body had already shrunken to half its size. His hands, legs and torso could not retain their original form. And yet he desperately continued to struggle, his movements looking like those of some crazed modern dancer running across the stage of a nightmare.

At length those struggles ended, and all that remained were half-eaten and unidentifiable body parts scattered about. Soon they, too, disappeared.

Nuvenberg's magical powers were truly awesome. All that time, the old woman had sat in the wheelchair with her eyes closed, chanting an incantation in a low voice. At last she opened her eyes. Her face was gray. Her shoulders slumped.

"I wonder if that finished him off," she said, wiping the sweat off her face. It was the consistency of cold glycerin.

"Impressive," said Ryuuki with unfeigned honesty.

"Shall we be on our way, then?"

"Shouldn't you rest a bit first?"

"Time is of the essence. Despite the grave countenance I'm wearing now, I'll be back to my jolly old self in a jiffy."

"This way," Ryuuki said, with a jerk of his chin. He stood in

front of the soaring wall and glanced curiously over his shoulder.

"Don't worry. I won't be a burden to you," she said, catching her breath. "This wheelchair has some curious properties of its own."

She closed her eyes.

"Hey—"

Ryuuki reached out his hand. His fingertips brushed against her shoulder. He stood still and watched as she and the wheelchair rose into the air. Anti-gravity controlled by the will alone—the phenomenon called levitation by the few monks and yogis capable of it.

After Nuvenberg disappeared over the fence, Ryuuki crouched down and jumped after her, an admiring expression on his face all the while.

A warm summer breeze drifted down the now vacant street. A creature akin to a grub or worm appeared from a nearby manhole, inching along on centipede-like legs. It slithered up to the bloody remains of General Bey, opened its tube-shaped mouth, and commenced sucking them in.

For several minutes the vacuuming, sucking sound alone filled the darkness. The strange worm reared up. If it had visible ears, it would have pricked them like a wary cat at another odd sound—a sound like a person trying to hack up a bit of food caught in the throat.

There was nothing else around that could make such a noise.

Then it came again. As if signaling a response, the groaning mingled here and there in the surrounding air as something leapt off the ground with a wet *slap* and *spatter*. A dark red glob of fresh meat. Closer inspection would have revealed it to be a torn chunk of small bowel.

Blood and sinew followed after it. A section of viscera.

However ripped and masticated, turned to soft pudding, each appeared to nonetheless possess a mind and will of its own. Each sought out its own kind and fused together, gradually forming distinctly recognizable shapes and sizes.

A shadow fell across the road and sidewalk as the moon scurried behind a black cloud. And then popped out again. The big, burly frame rose up in the white and glittering moonlight and stood there like a heroic Renaissance statue.

The statue took a breath, its heart beat and its lungs resumed their normal function. It scooped up the centipede and dropped it into its wide maw, the movement of its cheeks replaying the death struggle between the slug and the giant's teeth.

And then it was over, and the giant's Adam's apple bobbed as it swallowed what remained.

His right eye was a black cave—a tempered body that could only belong to a soldier—he laughed at the moon—this was none other than the man who'd been devoured minutes before by invisible bugs and wiped off the face of the earth.

Kazikli Bey.

Chapter Three

"We've got ourselves a bit of a problem."

Setsura's voice popped up like a pretty bubble from a corner of Mephisto's laboratory.

"Does it look like I care?" Doctor Mephisto curtly replied. "If my treating Princess concerns you, then take care of things yourself. The greatest vampire will die if her head is removed from her neck."

"*Removed* being the operative word." Setsura sighed and plopped himself down in the chair. His was the disconsolate kind of beauty that would bring out the nurturing side of the haughtiest supermodel, who would rush to his side cooing like a mother comforting a lost child.

"No good?"

"Cut it off and it pops right back on. Like one of those Rock 'Em Sock 'Em robots."

"If you wish to restore Kanan-san to her normal self, that is the fastest way. And it would spare me a good deal of time and effort."

"When did you get so lazy?" Setsura quipped, though not in his normally spirited manner.

"I am only speaking the truth. When doctors start to equivocate, society itself starts to crumble."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. So treat *him*, then."

Setsura looked at the ceiling. He was hanging from the ceiling by his feet, his wings folded across his back. Not a hair was out of place, like the good and proper Englishman he strove to be.

“You talking to me?”

Setsura gazed back at Yakou. “You know, you were a lot more square when we first met. Since when did you turn into a James Dean wannabe?”

“I adapt to my environment.”

“I assume you have been listening.” Mephisto leaned against the table. “Setsura would like to return you to your previous state, and went to a great deal of trouble to secure the necessary compounds. I have undertaken the preparations. All that is needed now is your consent.”

“And if push comes to shove?” Yakou asked defiantly.

“I force no treatment on anybody. The patient always retains the right to refuse.”

“In that case, I refuse.”

Setsura said, “Don’t you think the way you are right now is kind of embarrassing?”

“What’s this? You watch your words. You’re not Princess’s guest here. You are our prisoner.”

“Yes, dear,” said Setsura, holding up his hands in mock surrender. Then he lowered one hand and gave a dismissive wave with the other. “Better than being a sniveling little kiss-up.”

Yakou released his feet from the ceiling. He did a neat one-eighty in midair and landed in front of Setsura. Face to face. “What was that again?”

“Yes. Let’s see if I can think of a better way to put it.” Setsura stared off into space for a moment. “Ah. Better a dumpster-diving bum than a brown-nosing toady. How’s that?”

“I think you might want to take that back,” Yakou said menacingly.

“And if I say no?”

Mephisto finally intervened. “Stop it, you two.”

They all glared at each other. Though leaning back in his chair, Setsura’s glare was closer to that of airy indifference.

Mephisto eyed the two of them in turn. He said to Yakou, “Here is another way to think about it. You don’t want to return to your old self because you believe that would constitute a betrayal of your devotion to Princess. However, if your devotion is something so easily lost, once you actually lose it, it’d be like you never had it in the first place. No?”

“Doctor, your becoming an accomplice in this complicates matters.” Yakou made a sour face. “You have already determined to make me the subject of your procedure. I am sorry to inform you that I will not consent to it.”

Setsura goaded him in his typical relaxed manner. “The you you are right now is the odd man out. You remember the Elder? And who killed him?”

“My grandfather was an old fool,” Yakou answered coldly. “He raised a hand against Princess. A grave miscalculation. Older but apparently not wiser. He could not discern the capabilities of someone so much greater than himself and so beyond his own. His destruction was the predictable result.”

Setsura got up from his chair. “To think I’d ever hear the scion of the Toyama vampires say such a thing.” The tension flowing between the two young men was enough to set the hair on end.

“I do not think this is the venue to settle that discussion,” said Mephisto, stating what had been obvious from the start. “This is a dead end. We must explore the alternatives.”

“No matter what alternatives you explore, *I* will never betray Princess.” Yakou spoke in a manner approaching his aristocratic old self. A surprising break from his previous calm, cool and collected demeanor. But no matter. He did not appear willing to compromise in the slightest.

Mephisto made the next move. “Well then, Setsura. Let’s go kill Princess.”

Setsura did a double take. “What did you say?” Yakou stiffened in equal surprise.

“Logic here has run its course, and leads us to only one conclusion. It is time for action elsewhere.”

“That is pointless.” Yakou finally found his voice. “Setsura’s threads cannot kill her. There is no logic to fighting her.”

“But *that* will,” Mephisto said calmly. “Do you have that vial I

gave you?”

“Yeah.”

“Coat your threads with what’s in it and they will most assuredly cut Princess.”

“I cannot believe my ears. Doctor, didn’t you—”

“Didn’t I become one of you, you mean to say?”

“Yes.”

“I possess no sense of loyalty, as you define it. My only loyalty is to my curiosity, namely this world and its technology.”

“It looks like I will have to dispose of both of you once and for all.”

“Setsura alone will prove a hard nut to crack.”

Yakou knew that well enough already. When Setsura came to this world, their first fight hadn’t come to any definite conclusion. Neither one lost, but neither did one of them triumph.

“From what I have been able to surmise, you two could fight all day and night long and still come to naught. We need to change the point spread. Each of you swallow one of these.”

Mephisto reached beneath his cape and held out his right hand. In the palm were two red pills.

“One is a placebo. The other contains a paralyzing agent. It was originally a fast-acting compound. But that wouldn’t be very interesting. The effects of this formula won’t manifest themselves for

at least five minutes. In short, last five minutes and whoever swallowed the placebo is sure to win. If Setsura wins, then Yakou will submit to my treatment. In case of an opposite outcome, you can dispose of him in whatever manner you believe will foil his assignation with Princess. Well, pick your poison. First, Yakou."

Yakou hesitated for a moment, then reached out his right hand and took one of the capsules and popped it into his mouth.

"Next."

Setsura went to pluck the pill out of his palm as Yakou had, then stopped at the last second.

"Hurry up and swallow it. It's Yakou's contest to lose."

"Whatever," said Setsura, and gulped it down.

"Well, then. Take your squabble outside, if you don't mind. I wouldn't want any of the equipment in here to get damaged."

As soon as they left, Mephisto closed the door and leaned back against the desk and waited for five minutes. Then opened the door. Having confirmed they were no longer present, he said to himself, "Let's be careful out there."

Setsura and Yakou faced off in the field behind the manor house. The grass reached above their ankles. Here and there were splashes of bright color. White flowers of an unknown species.

"Time is of the essence," Yakou stated. "Let's get it on."

Setsura started running. Toward the sun. With the flapping of wings, Yakou dropped down in front of him. "Sorry, but I will be the

one with the sun at his back."

"That's not nice," said Setsura.

He cast out his devil wire. It slashed diagonally at Yakou's right shoulder. Yakou blocked it with the palm of his right hand. The wire disintegrated without touching it. Yakou's demon *qi*. Setsura dodged the second bolt and aimed a roundhouse right kick at Yakou's thigh.

The unexpected switch in attacks dropped him to his knees. Setsura followed it up with a right hook to the jaw. The dull *thud* that followed had the sound and feel of a win. Yakou's body punched a stickman-shaped hole in the undergrowth. He didn't get up. The sight of a solid KO.

Setsura hoisted him up on his shoulder. In front of the manor house he stopped in his tracks.

"So it's a come-from-behind," he said in a meaningful way. He pitched forward onto the ground. Mephisto's drug must have been in the pill he'd swallowed.

The sound of him hitting the ground roused Yakou from unconsciousness. Shaking his head, he got to his feet. He looked down at the incapacitated Setsura. "I'm sorry, but you are absolutely not the man for Princess."

He pulled back his right hand. In his condition, there was no way Setsura could escape.

The Defense Agency Director and another person were waiting for a phone call. Before them, in arm's reach, the red telephone sat on the big table in the conference room. They had been waiting for

twenty minutes, but the meeting elsewhere was still in progress.

The phone rang.

The two looked at each other. The other man picked up the receiver. “This is Kongodai. Yes, I understand. We thank the United States for its understanding and cooperation in this matter.”

The Japanese Prime Minister turned to the Defense Agency Director and said, “We’ve the okay from the U.S. If matters aren’t settled in Demon City Shinjuku by noon of the day after tomorrow, a U.S. military satellite will *accidentally* target the city with a tactical nuclear missile.”

Part Seven: Silent Night, Bloody Night

Chapter One

"Sir—Mephisto?" came a hoarse whisper from the darkened doorway.

The white-caped doctor didn't turn around, or stop the delicate work currently requiring his full attention. "Is that you, Kikiou?" he said, with no particular hint of interest in his voice.

Considering the gentle way he would tend to an old grandmother with a slight cold, this was indeed odd.

"Yes. The body parts I requested—are they ready yet?"

"I am making the modifications as we speak. I do have a lot on my plate at the moment."

"Oh, have you been putting the demands of others over my own?"

"A physician does not discuss the needs of one patient with another."

"Then please excuse the question," he answered humbly. "Would you mind if I observed the great Demon Physician at work?"

"I am assembling your body. Do as you wish."

"Then if you don't mind."

A loud *clunk* echoed from the doorway. The floor was finished with stone. Princess had torched the previous laboratory and so Mephisto was given a new one. The chemicals and compounds and

equipment were new too, though the Demon Physician's interests were sufficiently engaged either way.

The scraping, clunking sound came nearer, that of metal scraping against stone. Even when it came to a halt on his right, Mephisto didn't divert his attention from the workbench.

"Well, well," Kikiou said in admiring tones.

The Demon Physician and the scene around him made for a perfect fit. His attention was focused on human limbs, the same as those that writhed in Kikiou's warehouse. An arm split open from the wrist to the shoulder revealing its innards, and a leg similarly exposed.

It wasn't human flesh. There wasn't any blood. Instead of muscle, a milky-white clay-like material. Instead of blood, a similarly white liquid spotted the tabletop in drips and drops.

"So you're manipulating the clay at the molecular level, eh? It seems the wisdom that comes with age does not count for much when technological skill is involved."

"I suppose I should take that as a compliment."

"Though making it into a human-identical component is not that difficult."

Mephisto absentmindedly ran his fingers across one of the transparent tendons. A shiver ran down the arm. It seemed as much a self-conscious reaction to the doctor in white as a natural response from the nervous system.

“But is that acceptable to a Hsia Dynasty scholar and alchemist? Can a man accustomed to testing the boundaries of science settle for the same standard as before?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I will seek the patient’s input. Do you wish something more than two arms and two legs? Something more than the status quo?” Mephisto addressed the question to Kikiou.

Kikiou was dressed in a long robe. “More than this status quo?” he asked. “Show me.”

The long robe fell to the floor. Kikiou stood there wrapped in silver light. Excepting his head, the rest of him looked like a suit of medieval European armor. Though every body part was a faithful reproduction of the real thing, the screws and crude mechanical construction had a slapped-together feel.

At the same time, the same steel joints and hinges moved with a smooth precision that clearly exceeded that of industrial robots in the outside world. And considering the crude state of brain-computer interfaces at the present time, the mechanical human with the white beard was the very embodiment of science.

“I have tested and retested the proposition—whether or not a body made without steel can possess the strength and durability of steel. Princess is immortal, but alas, I am not. I have concocted ways of preserving the brain against the ravages of age. But not the body. If only I could be happy with this steel—but it is too heavy. My movements are restricted even walking around. Are you proposing a solution to the issues I have laid out?”

“I am.”

“Oh! And when?”

“Before dawn—by the reckoning of the outside world.”

Kikiou was struck dumb with surprise. The eastern skies would begin to brighten in less than eight hours. The hands and feet were not attached, and the tools and the know-how to use them all resided with Kikiou. Mephisto was a man who could create something out of nothing—even create more than something out of nothing. That’s why he was called the Demon Physician.

“I suppose I should expect as much from Doctor Mephisto,” said Kikiou, meaning no less.

“You wish to kill Setsura Aki, Kikiou?” Mephisto abruptly asked.

Kikiou didn’t answer. He seemed perplexed. A natural reaction, perhaps, knowing what he knew about the relationship between this doctor and Setsura.

This great Hsia warlock and scholar did not imagine that he and Mephisto were of one mind on the matter. Though he’d lived for four thousand years, there were mysterious aspects of this striking doctor even his eyes had not witnessed before.

Mephisto turned himself into a vampire in order to sate his lust for knowledge. During their first meeting, Kikiou had urged him to partake of an elixir that provided a peek at that world visible only to creatures of the night. All had gone remarkably as planned. He’d read Mephisto’s every move. But since turning into a vampire,

Mephisto had become a cipher.

According to Princess, Ryuuki had bitten Mephisto. And Ryuuki's sire was Princess. Humans became subject to the sire who'd sucked their blood. As powerful a vampire as Princess should be able to control Mephisto directly, without going through Ryuuki.

She showed no signs of doing so. Not that she did not desire to. Something about this doctor seemed to block her ability to control him without her being aware of it.

Even if it did not reach that far, at least when he was standing next to her, the strength of her vampiric influence should be felt. Without a word being spoken, he should yield to her as a child to a parent.

This doctor, though, evinced not the slightest inclination. That he possessed an uncompromising will was undeniable, though the way it expressed itself so invisibly was downright uncanny. This nonchalant deflection of Princess's power—as if to cancel it out entirely—could be found nowhere else in the world.

Mephisto had devised the means of becoming a vampire if only in order to grasp that knowledge that would allow him to understand what even he and Princess could not—this was the thought that constrained Kikiou's answer.

The room fell into silence, a silence that seemed to go on forever. At length Kikiou said, "That man is an evil and destructive star that threatens Princess and thwarts my aspirations. That star must be extinguished, no matter what."

“In that case, then let it be so. I look forward to seeing you destroy Setsura Aki. I swear upon the name of Doctor Mephisto that I will infuse these limbs with the power to do so.”

Mephisto smiled. The sound of steel rang out, Kikiou stumbling backward at the sight of that smile. The old man’s face was like that of an Old Testament prophet genuflecting before the face of God.

“I am indeed grateful to the Demon Physician,” he said. “The body of your making combined with my brain will make for an unbeatable combination. Setsura Aki will surely die. The very personification of Demon City itself will surely never taste defeat.”

For a long time, in the flickering shadows cast by the waxy candlelight, the Demon Physician and the steel warlock stood face to face, the death mask of that lovely young man rising up in each of their mind’s eyes.

“Good grief, General Ryuuki. You sure raked me over the coals.”

Setsura got up from the grass. Yakou had fallen at his feet. He’d taken the pill that contained Mephisto’s drug. Setsura collapsed first because, as he observed, Ryuuki’s demon *qi* dammed up in his guts was giving him painful fits.

He knew he was pretty well screwed as soon as Yakou’s attack came, and keeled right over.

“Turncoat,” he said, giving Yakou a kick in the side. “For the Elder’s grandson, you sure are a disgrace.” He folded his arms across his chest and pondered with a rather bored insouciance what to do with him. “I need Mephisto to get you back to normal. But you

know him. If you're not a patient in his hospital, he just can't treat anybody in a straightforward manner. A couple of aspirin and good night's sleep won't do it either. Or—just cure you this way—"

With a perfectly placid expression on his face, he wound the devil wire from his right hand around Yakou's neck. Did he really intend to wring the neck of his one-time ally?

"Peekaboo." Setsura flung out a strand of devil wire toward the stand of trees behind him.

"Trying to trick me?" The dazzling Demon Princess stepped from behind the shadow of a big cedar. She held onto the other end of the devil wire—that could cut through any object.

"Didn't fall for the feint, eh?" he said. He had only made a show of garroting Yakou, while waiting for a clear shot at Princess, sneaking up behind him. "What do you want?" he asked blandly. "You still need to repent of your sins, restore Takako-san, and part with your head, if you don't mind."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that," Princess said, raising her hand to her mouth and smiling. A carefree smile. Setsura's conduct was so beyond the realm of common sense that it left her momentarily speechless. But only for a moment.

She stared back at him, her eyes overflowing with fierce loathing and murderous rage. Hard to imagine this was the same woman who, in response to Mephisto's question, had said she loved Setsura.

"You get hit by Ryuuki's demon *qi* and still mouth off like that. But not for long, even if you want to. All that will issue forth from

your lungs are your curses and pleas. Come."

"Where?"

"My bedroom."

"I'm not into loose women."

"So you don't care what happens to Takako?"

Setsura didn't have an answer to that.

"Spend the rest of eternity dreaming bloody dreams in my bedroom, if you so please. But I can still hear her crying out for salvation, *Help me, Setsura-sama*, she says."

"Coward," Setsura fumed with the quiet fury of a dormant volcano.

Princess smiled. "I am forcing no one. You will follow me of your own free will. That is what your pride cannot abide, whether or not Takako is my hostage. However, this is not a one-time offer. It will not end after ten more times or a hundred. Until I am satisfied, you will follow me. Now come."

Setsura said as the pure white dress whirled around, "What do we do with pretty boy here?" He pointed at Yakou on the ground.

"Loser," Princess sneered at her most faithful follower.

"I wouldn't disagree," agreed Setsura. Die now, and he was on a highway to hell.

"Leave him there. Punishment for disobeying me and picking a fight with you. But what happened to him?"

“A dose of Mephisto’s medicine.”

“Like a stopped clock, that doctor ends up doing the right thing now and then. Then let him clean up after himself.”

“True, too.”

He trailed after Princess as she headed to the manor house, leaving Yakou alone on his bed of grass. The sunlight beat down unmercifully, tormenting the silent body with its burning heat.

Chapter Two

Instead of going into the manor house, Princess instead went down to the lake. The waves lapped against the shore. She did not slacken her pace as she entered the water. The waves washed over her feet and rose to her waist.

"Hey," said Setsura. "Where are you going? Consigning yourself to a watery grave? Way to go. I'm impressed."

"Quit dawdling," she answered over her shoulder.

"I don't like water. I can't swim."

"Kikiou tells me otherwise. Relax. Here alone the lake is make-believe."

"Eh?" was all Setsura said in return. It would make more sense if she'd said the entire thing was an illusion. Trust Kikiou to pull off something like that. Only a portion of the oncoming waves were unreal?

"What are you doing? Come. Not a hair on your head will get wet." Sunlight glimmered off the whitecaps as Princess disappeared beneath the waves.

Setsura stood at the water's edge. He knelt and dipped his finger into the water. And felt the dampness and coolness of the real thing. He pulled out his hand. Water dripped from the skin onto the palm of his other hand. He couldn't describe the sensation as anything but what it appeared to be.

Wrinkling his nose in distaste, Setsura stepped forward. The water came up to his ankles. “A slut and a liar,” he grumbled, but kept on walking into the clear water.

He stopped when the water came up to his neck. His skin was used it by now. It all seemed a dumb joke. He nodded his head forward. With a *well, whatever* look on his face, he submerged himself.

His hair floated up. The bottom of the lake was a faint green. Princess was twenty yards in front of him, the outlines of her body warping in the currents. His head rang numbly.

By now the water’s surface was far above him, but strangely seemed to be carved in bas-relief. He reached the limits of his lungs and took a breath.

The lake water rushed into his lungs. He coughed. The cough came out easily. He put his hand to his chest, surprised. He was surprised, but the expression on his face never changed. Nor its beauty.

The beautiful drowning man strode

along the lake bottom

His complaints above now reduced

to faint grumblings

Taking care so the bubbles bearing

the poison of his final prayer

did not muddy the lake's floor

His hair rose up full of indignation

His eyes beheld with ill humor

the stones and mud at his feet

All equally beautiful

Any maledictions he breathed here

could only sound sorrowful

If the fishes could recite poetry, that would be the poem they would sing.

Princess stopped. Setsura looked up. The sun was far away. The clear water was very deep. The dark shadows of fishes glided back and forth in front of his eyes like strange flying creatures.

The Demon Princess was standing before a soaring structure. It rose to the height of a two-story building. If the surface really was finished in green marble, he couldn't tell, which he considered a failure on his part.

"Your final resting place?" His voice rang out clearly.

"I rarely use it, but Kikiou appears to have moved the casket. Naturally, putting any other one into the water would make breathing difficult."

"You have a strange way of doing things."

Princess climbed a stone staircase leading to a doorway. The

building was shaped more or less like a cube. Setsura recalled the mausoleum floating in the center of the lake. The steel door opened. Setsura entered after her and was bathed in white light. He heard the door closing behind him.

A moment later, the water had all disappeared. Setsura looked at his arms and legs, unencumbered by the weight of the water. Far from being damp, running his fingers along the hem of his slicker produced the dry sound of skin against fabric. No fluid filled his lungs either. He couldn't help feeling a touch of admiration for the old alchemist.

They were in a hall that took up about a dozen yards on each side. At the back of the hall was a black double door set into the wall. Princess stood in front of it.

Without her touching it, it parted in the middle and opened silently to the right and to the left.

A deep blue twilight filtered in from the bottom of the sea, perfect for endless sleep, Setsura couldn't help thinking. Within the blue glow, gauzy curtains wavered in the breaths of air like waxworks cast in an uncertain light. A single ply unfocused the eyes, and when additional layers were added front and back, the misty shadows seemed to project themselves onto the back of Setsura's retinas.

In front of them the casket rose up like a small black mound.

A casket was an attempt to keep the deceased in the land of the living. Setsura had come here to release the soul from that curse and guide it on the long journey back to the realm of the dead. He had to wonder whether its surface could be severed.

Not turning around, Princess said, “Don’t think such trivial thoughts.”

“Are you a telepath as well?”

“In this room, everything is borne on the currents of the air.”

“How about that.”

The two stood in front of the casket. “Do you want to see inside?” Princess pressed, taking a step back.

“It won’t open in any event. I’ll leave that in your good hands.”

“Open it.”

“Pushy bitch.”

“Don’t you care what happens to Takako?”

“I’m such a featherweight.” Setsura shrugged and leaned forward and reached toward the lid. It must be the lid, but he couldn’t see any seams.

His fingers brushed the surface. A bolt of lightning shot through his brain. He tucked himself into a black ball and bounded away. His poker face had paled considerably.

“Did you see?” Princess asked, a smile in her voice. “This casket was made from white wood. It was not painted with black paint. This color is not black. This is blood, coated with the blood of those whose souls as well as their bodies I thrust down into darkness. You saw just now, didn’t you? What did they say to you?”

Setsura shook his head. Not in denial. To shake off the lingering horror. The memories stuck to him like glue. Four thousand years of blood and torment. He tried to forget the myriad of faces but couldn’t erase the images. They would be showing up in his dreams. He might have to resort to sleeping pills.

“Over the past four thousand years, some have come this far on their own. But none has ever opened the lid of the casket. When the night beckons, what I see are madmen standing in front of my casket, mumbling to themselves in delirium. There’s no need to explain what becomes of them.”

Her white teeth gleamed. Her pale hand softly touched the lid. A fissure ran around its circumference. A coward might imagine it a creature of unknown origins opening its black maw. The interior was inky black as well. The overflowing blood of the victims had seeped in everywhere.

Setsura detected the aroma of fresh wood, kindling a strange sense of incongruity. He drew closer and looked in. Takako lay there quietly in the undecorated darkness. She was dressed in a white gown.

“I haven’t sucked her blood since then. So if you were to liberate her now, she may yet return to human form, say, if Doctor Mephisto

took her under his care.”

Certainly a heartless declaration, knowing full well that he was already one of them.

“So what’s the plan?” Setsura asked, as if he were inquiring about the weather.

“As long as that girl is here, you will do as I please. As I have explained to you, I will take that soul and thrust it down into the muck and grime, pull it out of the sewer and make it kneel at my feet. Get in there.”

“I don’t think so.”

Setsura closed his eyes. The Demon Princess opened hers wide as the blood-red gleam sank into the depths of her eyes. She waved her hand. A moment later, an unearthly scream rose from the casket. The cry of a soul tormented by eternal pain and hunger. But even knowing it was Takako, Setsura didn’t move.

“Oh, so you will kill her then? Your thoughts are not far from the mark. Slit the throat with those mysterious threads of yours and not only Takako, but I will die as well. Go ahead and put that theory to the test. However, only she will die. My throat cannot be cut, as long as I will otherwise.”

“And when will you not will otherwise?”

“When my one true desire is lost and all the color is gone from this world. But that time is still a long way off.”

“I would not disagree with you on that.”

“Get in,” she commanded, her face brimming with a smile stolen from the devil himself.

Another scream echoed from the casket, longer and higher. Setsura cleared his throat and put his hand on the edge of the casket and vaulted over the side. Inside the casket, a generous space for two had already opened up.

Takako’s pallor was not so different from the last time they had met. Her eyes and lips alone were redder. The awful fangs jutting from her gasping mouth were the same.

“Takako-san,” he said.

Takako turned to him. “Aki-san—? Setsura-san—?”

Somehow she turned her whole body to face him. She reached out a pale hand to his chest. There was no place to retreat to, no place to run. Takako leaned over him, the smell of blood on her panting feline breath. Setsura quietly looked back into eyes suffused with a raw lust.

“Help me, Setsura-san. I hunger for blood. Please—just a little—give me just a little—”

She spoke as if in a fever. Her red lips pressed against Setsura’s throat. But a force acting against her will suddenly twisted her face away and pinned her hands to her sides. She bared her fangs and hissed at him like an enraged cat.

“Sorry,” Setsura said. “You’re going to have to hold out a while longer.”

“And what will holding out gain her?” Princess asked above them. “What trick do you still have up your sleeve?”

“Shut up. I’m thinking here.”

“Let me show you something.”

Something white floated down and covered them.

“Now what are you up to?”

Setsura tried to push that something aside, but it was like wrestling a down-filled pillow. And yet Princess was surely lying face down above them.

“So you’ve bound Takako? How sad. The man who came to save her won’t spare her a single drop of blood and then trusses her up to boot. Aren’t her cries for your blood cries of love? If you won’t satisfy her, then I shall.”

Princess moved smoothly on top of Takako. Though held fast and firm by the devil wires, her face glowed in ecstasy.

“Stop,” said Setsura. At the same time, a crimson ring circled Princess’s neck.

“Hoh. Aren’t you playing an interesting game.” Her neck was clearly bisected in two. But she laughed. “I didn’t do this. My blood flows thanks to you! What fate awaits the young woman? Ah, the eyes will tell.”

She raised Takako up. When Setsura tried to pull them apart, she grasped his shoulders. Her white face turned. The red lights of her eyes flashed through him like hot nails.

“Be quiet and watch. I won’t make her one of us.”

She brought her neck closer to Takako’s face. A thin stream of blood from the wound left by the devil wire fell onto Takako’s mouth. The thin line of her lips opened and with a gasp she swallowed it down. A rapturous look of satisfaction rose to a face twisted with pain and hunger.

“Isn’t my life force delicious?” she said, lowering her neck. “You can thank Setsura. This is my blood, but he is the one who makes it flow. He came to save you and ended up feeding you. Don’t move, else I may end up ripping her throat out.”

Takako’s lips touched her throat. Her bloody tongue trailed along the wound. Setsura calmly observed this strange sexual union between the two women.

Princess pulled away and Takako cried out in disappointment. “Patience, my dear. More of my delights are still to come.”

She ran her fingers down Takako’s robe. The fabric fell apart to the right and left, exposing the swell of her breasts. Princess put her hand to her wound and pulled it open.

The gout of blood spilled onto Takako’s sternum in splotches like what might be left behind by a giant amoeba. Princess slid down her body, her face hovering just above her belly button.

Princess’s blood glided down the natural channels of Takako’s abdomen, reached her navel and pooled there. Princess’s long, sharp tongue reached down and lapped at the pearls of blood. Her lips closed and her cheeks moved as might a sommelier’s while tasting a

fine wine.

The blood was her own. She had baptized Takako with it. And yet the mood engendered by Princess's actions was as if Takako had spilled her own blood in an equally lascivious manner.

Once again she lowered her head. Takako moaned. Princess's tongue glided up Takako's belly, spreading out the blood and mixing it with her saliva. She moved onto Takako's breast, licking the spots of blood off the luscious curves, sending shivers through Takako's body.

Her bloody lips closed around the nipple. Takako groaned aloud. Blood dripped from between Princess's sucking lips, spreading the scarlet stain across the breast. She coated Takako's body from her neck to her flanks.

"How do you find the scent of my blood? The nectar of the heavens. Do you want it?"

"I want it," Takako groaned in a delirium.

"You may have it."

Princess pressed her lips against Takako's. Their lips parted. Princess's tongue dipped into Takako's mouth. Takako's throat hummed and swallowed and drank all she had to give. Princess should not be able to hold so much in her mouth, but Takako choked and the blood erupted from between their lips.

Princess pulled back just a sliver and asked, "Satisfied?"

"No," Takako whispered.

Together with their entranced expressions, their conversation echoed the pillow talk of aroused lovers.

“You want more blood?”

“Yes.”

“Whose blood do you want?”

“Yours—I want your blood.”

“Would blood other than mine suffice?”

“Yes.”

“What about the blood of that man—Setsura Aki?”

“His—”

A faint glimmer of rationality flickered across Takako’s face. A moment later it had clouded over with surging desire.

“What do you say?” Princess pressed, her voice suffused with malicious joy.

“I want—Setsura-san’s blood—”

“Then you shall have it. Behold—”

Takako’s body was suddenly free. Setsura didn’t move. The situation had turned in a perilous direction.

“Drink your fill,” Princess whispered into Takako’s ear. She bit down on her lobe and snaked her bloody tongue into her ear. Takako moaned and writhed. “What do you say, Setsura? How does it feel to be assaulted by the woman you came here to save?”

Princess's voice now echoed in his own ears. Takako crawled atop the black slicker like some phantasmal insect. Princess's eyes glowed with a fierce and eerie light.

"Setsura-san—I—understand—" Takako bared the cravings of her soul. "I understand—at last. I love you. At last—I can say it. I want the blood—of the person—I love—"

The words of this once ordinary college coed welled up from the bottom of her heart. She opened her mouth wide. The two ivory fangs glistened inside the red maw. Tears poured from her eyes. Red tears. Tears of blood.

With the growl of a wild animal, Takako pressed her face against Setsura's neck.

In that instant, everything inside the casket changed.

Chapter Three

The sound of feet treading on sand mingled with the wash of the waves. Galeen Nuvenberg brought the wheelchair to a halt. The deep ruts being pressed into the damp sand stopped as well.

The old woman slowly gestured with her left hand. The broad expanse of blue water dissolved into the blue sky. On the far shore sat a resplendent manor house, bathed in white sunlight.

“What a nice place. In the end, European dreams fell short of such Oriental splendors. Wouldn’t you say, General Bey?”

“So you noticed me.” The voice could only have come from behind her, but it was definitely that of General Bey.

“They surely gobbled you to pieces, but apparently couldn’t stomach the entire meal. Or your flesh was not to their taste.”

“Where is the other one?” the steely voice asked.

“General Ryuuki guided me to the passageway and then disappeared. He is presently contemplating a life or a death in Demon City. I would have preferred his company, but this state of crisis can’t be helped. If he lives, I am sure we will meet again.”

“A man discontent with his outcast state? A weakling. It seems these Orientals have no use for eulogies.”

“I might imagine that these Orientals are rather more sensitive to such things, more than we Europeans who call ourselves civilized

and surround ourselves with walls of stone."

"Either way suits me. I have a quest to complete. That woman. I suppose if I offer up the head of the Czech Republic's greatest wizardess, I might take receipt of her that much easier. It is time to awaken to our destinies, witch."

"Well, then. Who in heaven or hell will determine them? Who will bring forth misfortune upon the other? Come, General."

The old woman closed her eyes. Within the vistas of wind and light seemingly fashioned to meet the most refined tastes, her wrinkled lips had already begun chanting the incantations of death.

The wheelchair abruptly listed to the side. The wheels hadn't sunk into the sand. The ground for two or three yards around her caved in. Cold water rushed into the hole. On the verge of crashing into her, the surge shot up into the air with a roar.

In the spray of water falling into the lake and onto the shore was General Kazikli Bey. He pressed his right hand against his left shoulder. The arm was missing. His right hand staunched the gushing blood.

"Nice move, coming from within the water," said Galeen Nuvenberg. "But you underestimated me." She held in her left hand a long, thick thing. "Although I too may have been a tad overconfident. To come away with only this—"

She tossed the thing onto the ground. General Bey's left arm. The old lady rose into the air. She reached into her hair. A bright line flashed between the great wizardess and the powerful vampire,

sparkling through the sunlight as it chased down the giant of a man.

General Bey grunted and fell to his knees.

A grotesque new tableau interrupted the scenic beauty of the mountains and the lake—a silver thread sewn through the general's throat and eyes—a strand of the old woman's fluttering hair.

As he struggled to stand, two more strands penetrated his knees. The general slumped forward like a tree under the woodman's axe.

"Good. Just stay right there while I administer my special potion. Go!"

A buzzing sound burst forth from her vest and made a beeline for General Bey's throat. It looked like a black metal beetle. As soon as it alit on his skin, its head spun with ferocious intensity, throwing off bits of flesh and blood as it drilled into his body.

The general tore at it, but he already lacked a left hand and his sewn-together right hand wouldn't move. The bug's objective was his esophagus. It bored in easily and dropped down, exploding just before reaching the stomach.

General Bey silently straightened. All his superhuman powers couldn't deflect the suffering that arousing his body from his immobile state inflicted upon his senses. His face and limbs turned purple. This time he toppled clean over.

The earth shook from the impact.

"That potion attacks the cells down to their nuclei. You won't be up and running around anytime soon. But just to make sure—"

Nuvenberg manipulated the joystick with her right hand. The wheelchair hovered a foot above the ground and tilted forward. The rocket launcher attached to the side of the wheelchair locked on the corpse lying in the sand.

Trailing fire, the pencil-sized missile punched a hole in the general's body and burst into flames, burning at thirty-thousand degrees. The lifeless frame glowed white-hot. The skies and earth turned the color of a false dusk.

The glow quickly dimmed. Light and shadow returned to the earth. Where General Bey had been, only a gray husk remained.

The wheelchair touched down. Nuvenberg leaned over and picked up a stone and tossed it at the gray mass. It hit the shoulder area and made a small hole. The mass disintegrated into powder and scattered on the sand.

"It is certainly not becoming for a witch to resort to U.S. military technology. Forgive me for having to make do with what was on hand. I cannot take the liberties I desire with the elements of this world either. Convey my best wishes to the next world, general."

Having exhausted the focused powers she needed to keep herself aloft, the wheels once again dug into the sand as she set off toward the manor house.

Nuvenberg came to the foot of the staircase leading up to the front foyer and stopped. She stared carefully at the manor house and then at the lake. "My senses draw me there," she said, her eyes picking out a spot on the blue water.

The same place where Princess and Setsura had gone beneath the waves.

“Here alone the water is a phantasm. Though for me it would become quite real. Then I must part the waters. My, my. All this work is tuckering out this old woman.”

Grumbling to herself, she took from her vest a fat wooden tube two inches wide and half a foot long. The surface sported a bright oiled gleam. Shapes like pursed lips were carved on three sides. At the top were three holes the diameter of a pinky finger.

“Now we separate truth from fiction,” Nuvenberg intoned, and cast the wooden tube onto the water.

The black shadow disappeared in the middle of the expanding ripples. And soon vigorously bobbed up. Only the small holes at the top floated a few fractions of an inch above the surface of the water. From the holes gushed a rainbow of colors.

Not like a rainbow after a storm. A mountain lake brightly lit in sunny autumnal tints. If a crowd of tourists had been there, more than its sheer incongruity with the environment, they would be shocked by its beauty and elegance as it arched through the heavens.

Such a pretty and brilliant rainbow could not possibly exist in the real world. Another magnificent rainbow curved through the sky, ejected by the tube floating in the water.

Where did this light came from? Undeniably from the water, the pretend water through which Setsura and Princess had walked. As proof, a depression appeared in the brimming surface of the lake,

about fifteen feet wide and three hundred feet long.

Only the water inside the transparent walls emptied out. The depression sank down a dozen feet and more. The bottom of the lake was already visible on the descending slope that reached out a hundred feet from the beach.

Where did the water go? Into the tube. The ordinary wooden tube sucked in the great volume of imitation water through the wooden lips carved on the sides and sprayed it into the sky in the form of a rainbow.

Within a span of ten minutes, there was a path in the damp sand in front of her. The walls to the right and left of her were made of water. Three hundred feet further on, Galeen Nuvenberg could see the large marble structure.

“Hold on, Setsura Aki. Your crippled and doddering old sidekick is on her way.”

She had gotten to the bottom of the lake when a big voice boomed out, “I will be going too.”

She glanced back over her shoulder in surprise, and saw General Bey standing a dozen or so yards behind her. Thanks to some sort of miracle, even his clothing was the same. The bellow of a carnivorous beast split the sky, and this evil incarnation of the immortal phoenix kicked against the wet sand and charged down the spit.

“Bastard,” said Nuvenberg. Without any apparent nervousness she spun the wheelchair around. The pencil missile split the air and engulfed the rocky slope in flames.

From within the ball of fire, the general swooped down on the witch from above. In the real world, Nuvenberg could have added a magical right hook to her left jab. But the walls of water checked her swing, magical or otherwise. Pulling another rabbit out of the hat at this juncture would require another uneasy moment of hesitation.

Plenty of time for General Bey to sink his fangs into her emaciated neck.

A shower of blue-white sparks sent Bey flying headfirst into the wall of water. He plunged in comically down to his waist. Like a trained seal jumping through a ring, he plopped back onto the path, a fish sticking out of his mouth.

He spit it out. And smiled and said, “What’s wrong, Nuvenberg?” She sat there staring up at the sky, her hand clapped to her neck. “However great the witch, once touched by my fangs she is assured the same fate as the lowest commoner. Ha! You will make a fine servant. I will proceed to the mausoleum first. You follow behind.”

With a shout of laughter, the medieval monster vaulted over Nuvenberg’s head and ran toward the building in the middle of the lake.

The pilot held out the headset. “Mayor, you’ve got a call on the hotline from outside the city.”

Kajiwara took it. “This is Kajiwara.”

He nodded. His expression didn’t change, but the tension showed in his voice. At this juncture, only the existence of the city itself justified using the hotline.

A gray shadow passed across his features. The call was from an informant he had at the Pentagon. Kajiwara's eyes widened in surprise. He leaned back and stared at the sea of stars above his head.

In geostationary orbit twenty-two-thousand miles above the earth, electronic devils were getting ready to spit down a volcano of fire and brimstone on Demon City.

"Turn the helicopter around. No, no. Keep on going to outside the ward. The National Defense Agency. The fate of Shinjuku really hangs in the balance this time!"

"But we're almost to Takada no Baba!" Kajiwara had ordered them to proceed there only minutes before.

"Belay that order. Change of plans. Keep going!"

The startled pilot—a new replacement—programmed the new destination into the GPS. He manipulated the joystick. The aircraft turned to the southeast.

"Mayor," broke in the security officer sitting next to the window. "What's that?"

In the halo of the floodlights, human figures on the road below sprang into his field of vision. A woman holding a suitcase was surrounded by a gang of men and women. The state of affairs needed no explanation.

"Are you going to help?" asked the reporter sitting opposite him.

"No—" Kajiwara saw the mike and camera turned in his

direction. Clucking to himself, he said, “Let’s rescue her.”

“Yes, sir.”

The pilot nosed the helicopter down. The woman looked up and raised her arms like she was calling for help, except the way she was waving the oversized suitcase was strange to say the least. The rest bared their fangs and stared back at them.

The guardsman next to the pilot announced over the bullhorn, “The rest of you get back, or we’ll open fire!” But they only crept closer. “We’ve got no choice. Fire!”

“They’re too close,” the gunner called back. “We might hit the woman.”

“Nothing we can do. As soon as we land, push them back and rescue her!”

Listening to the back and forth, Kajiwara caught a streak of light out of the corner of his eyes and groaned to himself. “Oh, shit.”

As the helicopter descended to the ground, a ball of fire engulfed the tail rotor.

Part Eight: The Visitor from Prague

Chapter One

Among these citizens of Shinjuku—now turned into vampires—one must have been an arms merchant in his previous life. The RPG hit the tail rotor.

"I'm losing control!" the pilot shouted, though sounding to Kajiwara like he was very far away. "We've got to land!"

A good thing, then, that they were already descending. The aircraft spun a full three-sixty and dropped thirty feet vertically to the roadway. Just as the landing gear made contact, retrorockets on the undercarriage cushioned the impact. Nonetheless, the crew felt the shock from the soles of their feet to the tops of their heads.

"Guns won't do much good! Use your knives. Aim for the heart!"

Giving no indication whether he comprehended Kajiwara's instructions, one of the guards staggered to the door and threw it open. The night wind carried on it the scent of blood.

"Rescue the woman and call Totsuka Station for backup!"

"Roger that!"

Five men carrying assault rifles and shotguns spread out on the pavement and rushed the wall of people twenty to thirty feet away from them.

There were in an intersection in front of a train station. Behind the crowd were the towering outlines of the big box department store

in Takada no Baba. The moon was bright overhead.

The vanguard punched through the line. Dodging the growling creatures that came at them, knocking the others out of the way with the butts of their rifles, the five made it to the ring of vampires surrounding the pretty woman.

The vampires turned as one.

An ordinary looking bunch. During the day, they would have mixed in undetected with the city's pedestrian traffic. Glad-handing salesmen with their attaché cases, housewives carrying grocery bags, high school students wearing their starched uniforms, skinheads in leather jackets—now they bared their fangs and charged.

"Fire!" the squad leader called out.

The reports of the rifles and shotguns drowned out his voice. The volley of gunfire knocked a woman on her backside. More retreated. Two took the full force of the blast of lead and flew backwards through the air. The five spilled through the gap and ran up to the woman, who had retreated to the cover of the building.

The soldiers looked at her in disbelief.

It wasn't the gaudy combination of the pink flowery ribbons and the kaleidoscopic shawl and the puffy red skirt. Or the century-old European revivalist style. But the plump, ill-tempered woman inside those clothes glaring back at them.

"What are you looking at?" the thick lips demanded.

"We're here to rescue you," said the squad leader, coming to his

senses. “This way.”

He took her hand and started toward the station. But only her hand moved.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Inside the station. Hurry.”

“What a bother. I don’t feel like it.”

The squad leader gaped at her. The fat brown-haired and blue-eyed foreigner didn’t realize the gravity of the situation.

“Lieutenant!” called out one of his men. He was trying to pick up the woman’s suitcase. “I can’t lift the damn thing!”

“Idiot,” he clucked to himself. He grabbed the handle and lifted with all his might. It felt like a ton of lead. He couldn’t budge it at all. Who the hell was this woman?

A shotgun roared nearby. They were surrounded two and three deep. Behind them was the wall of the building and the steel shutters. The human animals pressed forward with their glistening fangs.

The ones shot point-blank got to their feet as if nothing had happened. The half-missing faces flashed clownish smiles. Their remaining eyes shone with a fiery light. Their numbers seemed to be growing by the moment.

The squad leader reached for something on his ballistic vest. No matter how bad-ass the monster, three thousand degrees would turn it to charcoal. But he was out of options and that was just something

he'd have to live with.

"Get back!" he yelled, and pulled the incendiary grenade from the clasp.

A plump hand closed over his wrist. "Hold on. No need to get all worked up like that."

Without waiting for his reply, she lifted up the suitcase as if it was filled with air. A shadow sprang at them. The suitcase collided with the side of his face, a roundhouse to the chin, and threw the shadow backwards.

The vampires ceased advancing. The suitcase was a bigger deterrent than assault rifles and shotguns. She marched forward, holding up a hand to wave off the rest of the guardsmen. "You'd better stay back. It's dangerous."

Only the guardsmen faltered. The eyes of this gang of urban vampires cast off blood-red glows as they once again pressed forward.

"You are a stubborn lot." The fat lady bent over to unlock the lid of the suitcase. It had a combination lock. "Heh, heh. Take a look at *this*."

The fearless expression she'd showed the vampires faded from her face. She looked at the squad leader, frowned to herself and said, "What the hell was the combination again?"

"They're surrounded. They can't get out!" Kajiwara stared out the window of the helicopter and shouted, "Let's do something!" He reached into his pocket and said to the remaining guards, "Open the

door. I'm going."

"You can't, Mr. Mayor. It's too dangerous! Not with those bastards out there. Backup should be arriving from Totsuka Station any moment!"

"We can't wait that long. Hey, cameraman, can you still operate that thing?"

"No problem!" the cameraman promised. He'd whacked his head during the emergency landing and was still a little woozy. "You going out there yourself? Damn, no way I'm missing that shot!"

"Well, keep the camera on me. Open it up!"

The perilous intel from the Pentagon vanished from Kajiwara's mind. When it came to the pursuit of public honors, he would always work the situation so as to magnify his excellence as a public servant.

The door slid open. The fanged faces formed a solid wall before him.

"Get away!"

For Kajiwara, this was a once in a lifetime moment on the stage. Like the lion bowing to the lion tamer's whip, the blood-lusting voting public slunk back. High over his head, the mayor held a somewhat shriveled peach.

As he descended from the helicopter, Kajiwara felt himself hesitate. The vampires mobbed him like a movie star, but it wasn't his autograph they were after. This was the first time he'd felt such a

looming, inescapable threat.

"Fucking A," the mayor grumbled to himself, an expletive very much unlike him, and stepped onto the ground.

With their eyes on the vampires, the cameraman and guardsman followed after him.

"You got that?" Kajiwara asked over his shoulder.

"Got it!"

"Good. Now get back on!"

"What?"

"Get on board and haul me up on my signal!"

Confirming that the two had returned to the helicopter, Kajiwara scowled at the vampires around him. He grinned, leaned forward, then reared back, his throwing arm tracing an arc through the air.

The cameraman figured it out first. An image rose to his mind from his files on Kajiwara. Many decades ago, Yoshitake Kajiwara had pitched for Shinjuku High School at the Koshien National Baseball Championships.

The summer sun slanted off the sweep of his hand. A roar rose from the crowds in the stands. Kajiwara was going to make that peach the pitch of a lifetime.

In that instant, the earth shook. Everybody there turned his attention across the crowded street. The cordon grew larger in circumference. A dark brown lump rose up from the ground. It was the trunk of a giant tree.

A spider web of cracks branched out through the sidewalk as the fat roots reached out, groaning like some bellowing beast stretching its limbs.

Kajiwara and all the vampires stared dumbfounded as black lines reached out into empty air. The bottoms of the lines were dotted with bright plump spheres.

"*Aiiyee!*" A very unladylike shriek split the air. The tree shook. The heavily-laden branches rained the fruit down on the heads of the demons.

Hundreds of peaches.

Fewer screams than might be expected. Such was the excruciating assault on their senses that they fell wordlessly to the ground and lay there spasming and twitching.

The only ones still running away barely had breath to shout. And most of their cries soon disappeared. The fallen peaches did not splatter, but ran down the ruts and slopes in the asphalt caused by the erupting roots, spreading out in all four directions. All it took was one to touch a fleeing heel.

Several rolled up to where Kajiwara was standing stock still. He reached down and picked one up. The vampires around him were already taking flight.

The feast the demons planned for this night had turned into a complete bust. From the direction of Waseda University came the howl of police sirens. The party was definitely over. The vampires still unscathed turned to the shadows and vanished into the night.

The patrol cars showed up a minute later to corral the vampires who remained. And they lay there, staring up at the soaring peach tree until they were escorted one by one to the paddy wagons. Nobody resisted arrest. It was more likely the cops who instinctively resisted touching them.

With a scornful glance at all the hubbub, the pudgy silhouette trudged off toward Waseda University.

"Wait there a minute!" Kajiwara called out.

"What?" she answered, turning around. It was unlikely she could turn her head without her whole body coming along.

The dents and creases in her almost round body suggested to Kajiwara that she was wearing some sort of industrial-strength corset.

"Didn't your mother tell you not to stare?"

"Ah, no, um—I'm Kajiwara, the ward mayor."

Her doughy face split into a broad smile. "Hoh, the head honcho himself."

"Well, not really—"

Before he could finish, she'd seized his hands in her own. A pudgy sensation he'd never quite felt before, like shaking hands with a damp baseball mitt.

"I'm very pleased to meet you."

Her accent struck a familiar chord. It took him a moment to figure

out where he'd heard it before. "Are you from the Czech Republic?"

"I am."

"Your Japanese is very good. Where are you headed?"

"To my sister's place."

Shaking his head to clear his mind of the image of an even *fatter* sibling, Kajiwara said, "Your dress, the peach tree—both were a big surprise. Thank you for coming to the rescue."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Hoh. It was nothing."

Kajiwara turned away, but couldn't suppress that sinking feeling.

She jutted her worm of a finger in his face. "Let's just say you owe me. One day I'll come to collect."

The sinister glee in her voice and the wicked look in her eyes were already making Kajiwara regret his earlier words. Now was a good time to change the subject.

"Excuse me, but would you be headed for Magic Town?"

"Bingo." She smiled again. "My sister lives there. I'll be freeloading off of her for the time being."

Kajiwara tried not to imagine what that was all about. He looked up at the peach tree and said, "That was an impressive display of magic. I would certainly like to share the credit, if you could tell me your name."

The woman laughed. "That was no big deal as far as magic goes. I only planted the seeds. My name is Tonbeau."

“Tonbeau-san?”

“Yes. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” With a grunt and a heave-ho, she turned and continued on her way.

For reasons he didn’t understand himself, Kajiwara felt compelled to call after her, “Hold on. The fact of the matter is, I was on my way to Magic Town too. I might as well accompany you to your sister’s place.”

“A champion idea!” she said, whirling about with unexpected vigor. The suitcase groaned.

“Hey, you there,” Kajiwara said to the nearest guardsman. He asked the woman, “What would be the name of your sister?”

“Galeen.”

Kajiwara stared back at her.

“You haven’t heard of her? Well, she is the plain and retiring type. Goes by Galeen Nuvenberg.”

Chapter Two

"You don't say!" The stunned Kajiwara stared at her. It was like being told a peacock was sister to a hippo.

"What are you looking at?"

"Ah, nothing," he said, waving his hand. "In that case, the two of you together could double your power. There's a favor I'd like to ask of you. Though when it comes to that sort of magical power, it's the kind of thing one usually asks only of God."

"Haven't met a god yet who didn't make magic his enemy," grumbled Tonbeau Nuvenberg, now the city's second witch from the Czech Republic.

But Kajiwara took no notice. "In any case, let's go to your sister's place. We can talk in the car."

"That's a good idea," said Tonbeau, a greedy leer in her eye.

"Of course, the city will generously reward you."

"Well, well, well," she chuckled.

"We would be very grateful. Hey, bring around a patrol car. First take us to Magic Town. Then contact the ward office and send a helicopter to pick me up in, say, thirty minutes."

They got into the patrol car and sped off.

Kajiwara got right down to business. "I was going to make this

request of your sister."

"Concerning what, pray tell?" said Tonbeau, feigning ignorance. She was not one to let her services go cheaply. No matter the situation, there was always a part of her brain adding up the profit potential.

"I want to cover this city with peaches."

"How about that."

"What do you think?"

"A subject I happen to know something about."

"Good to hear. I'd like to see what you can do."

"Fine with me. But I wonder what my sister will say. The Czech Republic's best witch can be awfully stingy when it comes to making the most of her powers. She's pretty hardheaded on this point, and if she refuses, it would be tough for me to go along."

"And that is where your help could prove most useful," Kajiwara said cajolingly to the fat lady, whose ample backside took up two-thirds of the back seat.

"Understood. I'll certainly talk to her and see where she stands."

"I appreciate it."

But when they arrived at the house, Galeen Nuvenberg was not home. The door was locked. She was somewhere in Shinjuku's Chuo Park, carrying the battle to the demon's home ground.

"Looks like she's out." Tonbeau took her hand off the door knob

and twined her hands together and mumbled what sounded like a chant.

"*Aiiyee!*"

The same sort of cry as when she'd unleashed the peaches. She kicked with the black pump on her turnip-shaped leg and the door opened. Or rather, it rolled up like a can of corned beef.

"I do declare. Her little sister comes to visit for the first time in fifty years. You'd think a more courteous welcome would be waiting."

Kajiwara followed the complaining woman inside. "That was quite the kick. Is that what you did before with the peach tree?"

"That was more like *this*." Tonbeau made a karate chop motion with her hand.

They were in the living room. From the outside, the interior appeared wrapped in darkness. But the room was filled with light. She set down the suitcase with a heavy *thud*. The near-round woman clapped her hands. Kajiwara could have sworn even the shadows shuddered a bit.

"Hey! Doesn't anybody in this house have any manners? Your guest has traveled a long distance to get here and she deserves to be greeted properly. Hurry up and get out here!"

The woman thundered like an enraged bull. Keenly sensing unseen things scurrying about in unseen places, Kajiwara felt a trickle of cold sweat go down his back. Answering the discourteous caller, a patter of small footsteps came from behind the door at the

back of the room. The knob turned. A small figure stood there.

"Welcome, Tonbeau Nuvenberg-sama." The doll girl took hold of the hem of her deep blue skirt and curtsied elegantly.

"Well. Somebody here remembers her manners. You know me, child?"

"Yes. My mistress has made mention of you on several occasions."

"Then let her know her stubborn and ill-tempered younger sister has arrived. Where is she anyway?"

"She is out presently."

"Where to?"

"I do not know."

"And when did she say she'd be back?"

"She didn't, except that once she had left, I was to assume she would not return."

"Figures. When did she leave?"

"About an hour ago. I do recall that she was accompanied by a young man."

"Hoh."

"A vampire, no doubt."

Kajiwara stiffened with surprise.

"And how would you know that?" queried Tonbeau.

“The smell of blood. It persists and yet remains fresh.”

“It’s Ryuuki,” said Kajiwara.

Tonbeau’s reaction was all the more startling. She cast him a sideways glance and said, “So my sister’s out with a young vampire, eh? Who knows when they’ll be back? I’m going to take a nap.” She ordered, “Escort me to the guest room, Miss.”

“I cannot agree to that.”

“What are you saying?” the fat voice demanded.

“Though you may indeed be my mistress’s dear sister, without her permission, I cannot allow you to leave this room. If you wish to be treated as the person you claim to be, you must first submit to my interrogation.”

“You dare speak like that knowing who I am?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” Tonbeau doughy face inflated to pound cake dimensions. Kajiwara felt her tendrils of thought reaching out through the darkness. Somewhere close by a crow cawed.

Unexpectedly, the pound cake broke into a smile. Warm and friendly, that of a completely different person almost. “Fine. Proceed with the examination.”

“Thank you very much.” The doll girl smiled as well. Though for some reason, Tonbeau’s smile creeped out Kajiwara more than before.

“And?”

“You have three wombs and your blood is blue?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tonbeau answered. “I’ve got two, and my blood is clear as rain. No witch can call herself so unless her blood vessels flow with ether and salt.”

“A splendid answer. What I would expect from the sister of my mistress.”

“Hmph. I don’t suppose that’s it?”

“No. That settles your status as a guest. Next is the matter of your lineage. Mr. Mayor, if you please.”

When he hesitated, Tonbeau said, “Do as the girl says.”

The mayor lined up next to the doll girl. There wasn’t a skylight in the living room. Or rather, looking up, it did not appear to be there.

The black shadow descended from above Tonbeau’s head as if the particles of the night itself had crystallized into a large snowflake. The raven’s caw resonated through the room. The sharp talons dug into her shoulder. Its beak flashed like an ice pick and gouged out her eyes.

The very woman acknowledged as Nuvenberg’s sister.

Blood gushed out. The “examination” did not end there. The flapping of wings fanned the air against Kajiwara’s face as the bird hopped from her shoulder to the top of her head. And then by the power of its wings—even more than the woman’s sheer weight—twisted her head right off her neck.

Kajiwara's eyes bugged, about as wide as they could without physically popping out. Needless to say, he couldn't even manage a scream. A black lump pushed out of the bloody stump. A human head, he realized.

The face appeared with a pop. None other than that of Tonbeau Nuvenberg. The spitting image of the head dripping black blood carried aloft by the raven. Kajiwara felt like he'd been swept up in the midst of a waking nightmare.

"You done yet?" asked the new face, clearly peeved.

"I am finished." The doll girl did sound a bit pleased with herself.

Despite being the mayor of Shinjuku, it was at times like this that Kajiwara really got the feeling he was smack dab in the middle of Demon City.

"Exactly what I should expect from my mistress's sister. Please make yourself at home."

"And it's about time. Hurry and clean up the blood, will you? Appearances aside, I don't much care for the sight or smell of it."

"I understand. What would you like done with the head?"

"Don't care. The crow can have it for dinner."

"Thanks," came the raven's voice from above.

"Ah, so the bird knows how to speak."

"Yeah, does Polly want a fucking cracker?"

“I don’t care much for smart-ass crows.” Tonbeau bobbed her chin at the suitcase on the floor. “The mayor and I have things to discuss. You take that to my room.” She sighed. “Man, I’m beat.”

Chapter Three

White-hot anger coursed through the casket. Takako's lips were about to close around Setsura's windpipe when Princess took hold of her hair and jerked her head away.

"Why?" Takako pleaded in a strangled cry. "Let me. Let me drink his blood."

"No," said Princess, grinding her teeth. "That will never happen. *I* am the only person who may drink this man's blood."

Having ordered her to, this was certainly an unexpected change of heart.

"You shall remain with me for the time being. All the better to torment those who came to save you. Were I to truly make you my servant, they would abandon the cause. So that is the one thing I won't do. I won't give them the satisfaction. You will drift for all eternity between their world and ours. I alone—who drank your blood—will decide which. Hoh, won't that make Setsura suffer. How he wishes to destroy me and save you. But he knows that he cannot do even that. No matter how sharp his wires, I will not die—not as long as I still have hopes for this life of mine."

Princess pressed her lips against Takako's, entwining their tongues together, inviting Takako to penetrate her mouth. Their mouths were smeared with blood. Their breaths blended together, hot with arousal and yet cold as ice.

Princess pulled away. Takako's tongue pursued her. With the dexterity of a gymnast, Princess shifted her position and buried her face between Takako's legs.

"Humans like you are never satisfied with our manner of delights. But shall we see what Setsura thinks of the natural physical response to more mundane pleasures?"

Princess's white hands seized Takako's thighs. Her hips rose up and Princess went down. A raw, wet sound like a dog lapping water. Takako's upper body twisted and arched to seemingly superhuman limits, as Princess's assault on her senses aroused in her otherworldly ecstasies of the flesh.

Princess raised her head. "How does that feel?" And lowered her face again.

Takako clasped her hands to her breasts. Her fingers dug into the flesh, tracing lines of welts in the skin that filled with blood, and in a frenzy she rubbed it all over her body.

Setsura watched it all. He couldn't move. The power of Princess's eyes had insured that much.

Princess squeezed Takako's nipples. Takako writhed in the throes of a passionate purgatory. Such a display suggested that the enthralled girl would give up her life to wanton pleasure before the vampiric ritual could ever commence.

Princess abruptly lifted her head. "Hoh. So now *he's* crashing the party. A man who hates water like a cat—he just can't let go of this cute little catnip," she jeered him, even as her words expressed a

kind of admiration. “But having come this far, how will you open this casket, General Bey?”

The door of the mausoleum easily deflected the harsh pounding. General Bey gave up after five blows and considered his next move. When his mounted knights couldn’t get through the lines, rather than simply redouble the effort, he’d have his archers lay down covering fire before sending the cavalry in once again.

This adroitness in switching strategies is what made a good commander great.

Bey retreated five steps. He bent over and pushed off against the ground with all his strength and charged the door like a mad bull. The force his physical body alone imparted was felt not so much by the door but by the walls supporting it. Cracks shot through the support pillars. The door collapsed inward.

The crash echoed after him as a thunderclap follows lightning. The general stepped inside and stood on the fallen door like a fierce Deva king. He glanced contemptuously around the room, his frame filled with the same might and power that was on full display five hundred years ago when he’d toppled the strongholds of the invaders.

His eyes fell on the black casket. With an inhuman growl, he wiped his mouth. The dark red blood on the back of his hand belonged to Galeen Nuvenberg.

General Kazikli Bey licked the blood off his hand and descended the marble staircase. Lust burned in his eyes like a petty thief stumbling upon a dragon’s hoard. Without a moment’s hesitation, he

seized the lid of the black casket.

And was hurled back across the room.

Not on purpose, not the result of some surge of power. His body itself reacted reflexively, without any time to take safety measures or the like, and threw itself away from the casket.

He quickly got to his feet—and sank back down to his knees, the energy sucked out of him. His nervous system took on a life of its own. His face was the color of clay.

Laughter rang out around him like the ringing of silver bells. The general forced his head to turn as Princess stepped out from the shadow of a stone column.

"How sweet of you to come, General."

A light wavered in her right hand. In the black steel candelabra, three candles burned with a blue light bluer than the bottom of the ocean.

"A wonderful aroma—but you wouldn't understand. In fact, there is no aroma. These candles draw up any odors. I cannot tolerate my casket casting off any other aroma but my own."

In one ear and out the other. "Will you open this casket, Princess?" the general barked. "Or will I have to smash it open?"

"Can you, General? The bride you seek is indeed inside the casket. But she is not alone. She is sharing her pillow with a beautiful man who is the love of her life. Do you have what it takes to separate them?"

“Are you talking about Setsura Aki?” he asked, his volcanic voice strangely subdued. His face slowly changed—knowing what atrocious evil had twisted that face would surely convince the most hopeful saint that God had made a mistake.

“I can hear them whispering sweet nothings. Groaning. Oh, she’s a tiger in the sack. I wonder what they’re doing right now? But with a lover that pretty, who could resist him?”

General Bey’s lips trembled again.

Princess noted it and added, “Yes, that loathsome Setsura Aki. The same one fucking Takako as we speak. Will General Bey preserve the honor of his good name and open that casket and call down the judgments of heaven upon them?”

“The loathsome Setsura Aki.” This time the words spilled clearly from General Bey’s lips. “I shall personally deliver any man who touches Takako’s fair skin to the bowels of hell.”

“That’s the spirit, General.” The flames cast shadows across her twisted and lewd smile.

Once more, General Bey stood in front of the casket and swung his right fist down on the lid. And again his body was wrenched about and sent flying. As he sprawled on the floor, Princess’s sneering laughter chased after him.

The general convulsed as if gripped with a fever. He could not know that Setsura had met with a similar fate. He knew only the true nature of the force that repelled him—the torment and anguish of those whose blood covered this casket. The damnation of those

humans whose blood Princess had sucked and who turned into creatures of the night.

And one more black art of the woman who had led them to such a fate must be her ability to alter the nature of that curse when they tried to open the casket.

"What? Can't the devil who skewered thirty-thousand Turk soldiers summon any more reservoirs of strength?"

The general retreated, a glowering light shining in his eyes. It'd sunk in that there was no touching the casket. He tucked his right hand into his pocket, making a throwing motion as he withdrew it.

A slender band of light connected him and the casket and undulated to no effect. The flash of devil wire—that he and Setsura had exchanged on the roof of the Keio Plaza Hotel—was also repelled.

"Oh, please," Princess chided him. "You have reached your limits. None may open the door to my sleeping chamber without my permission, not the greatest emperors or warlocks. Or Kazikli Bey."

As if sweeping those words out of the way, the general charged forward. Watching as his hands reached for the lid of the casket, Princess burst into laughter.

It was a scream or a war cry that shook the heavens, but the general didn't lose his footing. However his body tried to flee of its own accord, his hands reached for the casket and held him back.

His elbows twisted and cracked and his own body rebelled against him. The flesh split up the arms. The triceps, biceps and

extensor muscles frayed and tore one after the other.

"Idiot," Princess sneered.

The smile froze on her face. General Bey's hands were useless. He couldn't even twiddle his thumbs. And yet the casket moved. Contortions fanned out from the bottom of the casket and the floor. The striations were more like soft ripples at this point, but they were definitely spreading.

"Takako—"

Her name spilled like rough gravel across the floor of the mausoleum. Once again he applied his shoulder to the casket.

The back of his tunic bulged out, his right shoulder blade dislocated and tore free. This vampire lord had surely never suffered so in his life. And never would again. His greatest enemy was himself. There were few in the world who would smash their bodies to bits in order to achieve their goal. And the terrible ferocity of this unfolding scene was rarer still.

No sooner had he taken a full step than his hip bone broke, followed by his thigh. The quadriceps and fascia snapped. A moment later, his upper body sunk down as the kneecaps shattered.

He slumped to his knees as the big casket lurched against him.

The whole frame of the Demon Princess shook with laughter. "Can you even stand, General? Or will you bear my resting place on your shoulders for eternity? What a waste your second life turned out to be."

The peals of laughter echoed around the mausoleum. The flames of the candles flickered. There was no reason to doubt her self-confidence and scorn, what with the general's limbs bent like toothpicks.

The eyes of the general and the Demon Princess met. That implacable tenaciousness hadn't dimmed in the slightest.

"Ah, what a stubborn bull of a man," she said with an exaggerated sigh. "I shan't be getting a wink of sleep like this. Time to put you out of your misery."

She brought the candelabra up to her mouth and pursed her red lips. The flame on the right winked out without the slightest waver.

The general's throat rumbled. It took all of his self-control to keep the contents of his stomach from erupting out of his gut. An indescribable stench—that would send the risen dead back into their graves—filled the interior of the mausoleum.

"That's one," whispered the Demon Princess. "And here is number two."

Just as the flame on the left winked out, the general vomited. The contents of his stomach—his food and sustenance—spilled onto the floor. Bright red gore. The thick fountain of blood continued to pour from his mouth, raising a small tsunami in the ocean of red. The wave lapped about his knees.

A picture of the damned writhing in a sea of blood.

In that instant a change was born. The torturous wrenchings ceased. The twisted limbs returned to normal. The knees and elbows

knit themselves back together with a loud clicking sound.

Princess was the only one amazed. The look on General Bey's face made it clear that he wasn't the source of the transformation. Princess whirled around. General Bey's gaze followed hers.

The two sets of eyes focused on the open door, taking in the image of an old lady in a wheelchair.

Galeen Nuvenberg. The front of her dress was wet with the blood dripping from her neck. Her face was the color of water. General Bey's resurrection could only be the work of this powerful witch. Except that he was the one who had left her in this dire condition.

"Pull yourself together, General Bey," she said, pushing the words out through her dry lips. "Destroy Daji's casket. The resting place of the vampire is her dark source of life energy. Destroy it and you will deliver the fatal blow. Not even Daji can exempt herself from the rules. You have consumed the blood of Galeen Nuvenberg. You should be capable of that much."

"*You*—"

Princess ran, her hems flapping. But the remaining candle erupted into a ball of fire before she'd taken three steps. She cast the candelabra aside and leapt back as the fire consumed the front of her gown. Brushing it off as she landed, the flames wrapped around her hand.

"—*bitch!*"

The fire sucked into her mouth. Princess bent over as it seared her from the inside out. But the choreographer of this beautiful

dance of death was paying no attention. She folded her hands across her chest and mumbled an incantation, her eyes tightly closed.

A stark silhouette rose from the floor. The slanting casket came almost to the vertical. Roaring like a lion, the general lifted the black casket over his head.

"No, you won't!" Princess's voice rang out from the midst of the conflagration.

In that moment, a dark blue mass pressed inside the mausoleum. Fighting magic with magic, in a flash Princess had liberated the real water from the barriers erected by Galeen Nuvenberg.

The wheelchair-bound witch disappeared. The general was swallowed up as well. As darkness engulfed the mausoleum, the fiery form standing in the middle shrieked with laughter. Until that too was soon swept away in the raging currents.

Seen from the air, the water in the lake suddenly spilled into the long, narrow trench with a frothing of whitecaps. In less than two seconds, the lake was flat and calm, as if nothing had happened. Bright sunlight poured down. The wind soon beat down the waves that remained.

In the forest, a bird plaintively called out.

Five minutes after the deadly struggle at the bottom of the lake, a boat set off from the wharf near the manor house and sculled to the center of the lake. The white figure standing in the prow was none other than Doctor Mephisto. Yakou pulled on the oars.

Mephisto had resuscitated him after he'd collapsed during his

battle with Setsura. Flying about in search of Setsura, Yakou spotted the watery road leading beneath the water. He was about to take that road himself when the calamity occurred.

The man pulling at the oars looked a bit put out, not surprising considering his true abilities.

"Something happened beneath us," mused Mephisto. The red boat came to a stop. He gazed down into the water.

"You don't think that—Princess?" Yakou asked uneasily.

"Setsura lost his queen and was about to be checkmated. I don't think this was his doing—though there is no way to say for sure."

Mephisto brought his hand to his chin and gazed around.

"What do you think, Doctor?"

"All we can do is wait and pray that nothing untoward is going on below us. The going assumption is that the average Occidental cannot swim. What about the average Oriental?"

"Hmm."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning some sink and some swim."

"Depending on whether they can or not."

"That would be the case."

"A fairly useless answer."

"I apologize for that," Yakou said. He narrowed his eyes.

Mephisto could tell that he'd noticed something. Two hundred feet or so off to the right, a human-looking object bobbed to the surface.

"What's that?" Yakou exclaimed.

"Ah, what did the great national hero come here to accomplish? I don't imagine your mistress has made it through unscathed either. Seeing that she hasn't floated to the surface, perhaps the currents swept her away."

Just then, something like a white, tube-like sash slithered beneath the boat and headed toward General Bey. The boat rocked, the waves raised by other things coming through the water. Around the big man bobbed heads and white torsos.

"Water dragons," Yakou observed.

The undulating white skin and scaly flanks resembled those of snakes. But the heads were human. The head of a salaryman with a comb-over reared up twenty feet into the air and looked down at General Bey. The face of a middle-aged woman, a student, an office lady—bangs falling over their foreheads as they eyed the prey below.

"Doctor—" Yakou said, rising to his feet, but Mephisto urged him to sit.

The office lady rushed toward General Bey. The small mouth opened from ear to ear. Two pairs of fangs top and bottom glittered in the red maw.

The salaryman in the steel-rimmed glasses struck her in the side. Blood spouted into the blue sky. The salaryman's jaws sank into the

office lady's guts. Taking that as a signal, the college coed tried to sink her fangs into the salaryman's neck. She was shrugged off and lunged at in turn.

The foamy spray rose higher and rained down blood. A red mist appeared here and there on the surface of the lake. The flailing torsos thrashed the water, tipping the boat wildly back and forth.

"Doctor—what is this?"

Instead of answering Yakou's question, Mephisto tucked his right hand inside his coat.

With a thrumming sound, a ray of silver light danced toward the surging waves.

Looking askance at the frenzied water dragons with human countenances crazed perhaps by the smell and taste of blood, a new visitor split the water in leaps and bounds, racing toward the floating vampire lord. Yakou shouted in surprise as it vaulted out of the water and jumped through the air. Red tendrils like whiskers drooped from the snout of the giant carp thirty feet long.

It flew like a phantom, a streaking swallow, and with a single gulp swallowed one of the water dragons standing out of the water. And fell back with a huge splash. Then again, and again. Leaping and falling. After each time there were that many fewer water dragons.

The giant carp's enemies outstripped its actions. Fresh creatures were closing on General Bey from three sides, showing their fangs, when a horrible panorama unfolded.

Three of their torsos were sliced and diced where they swam. Their faces contorted in their death throes, and they sank below the waves. One after the other, each meeting the same fate. The giant carp did not slacken in its rampant domination. It wasn't long until the last of the blood-hungry serpents had vanished into the depths.

"I'd like to take a break, if you don't mind," Yakou groaned.

Mephisto nodded. With a single stroke of his large wings, Yakou drew himself up into the sky. It stood to reason, after all; any creature attracted to the smell of blood would find this a harsh environment.

The muddy red water spread out for several hundred feet. The neatly bisected sections of the water dragons bobbed in the water. The half-submerged human faces stared blankly at the awful scene surrounding them and gritted their teeth, unable to stand what they were seeing with their normal human nervous systems.

And in the very center stood the strangely beautiful tableau of the white doctor in the small boat, a testament to the saying that at the extremes, the gruesome became its own kind of art, such as that appearing in a brilliant landscape painting by one of the masters.

"Splendid," said the water on Mephisto's right. The giant carp's face poked out of the water. The voice was Kikiou's.

"You've been watching." Less a question than an observation.

"I still cannot move, so I send substitutes in my stead. Whatever I could do is all thanks to you."

"Do you have the woman?"

“Yes.”

He didn’t say whether he meant Princess or Takako.

“And could you show what you have in your stomach?”

“Understood.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the big carp opened its mouth. Inside, half of his body visible, was General Kazikli Bey.

“Would you have any plans for him, Sir Kikiou?”

“Yes.”

This time the answer was markedly more forceful. But this was Doctor Mephisto.

“I would like to borrow him for a while, Sir Kikiou. I think it would prove useful in making your arms and legs.”

The fish’s mouth flapped open and closed. “Understood,” it said.

Then a small wave rippled across the lake and Mephisto was alone.

“Kazikli Bey, I would be honored to treat such a renowned patient.”

What did he really think of this unconscious vampire lord? What did he plan on doing with him? The doctor in white stood like a solitary statue in the small boat. And it seemed that dread more than beauty warred for his attention.

Part Nine: Dream Weaver

Chapter One

Setsura was aware of everything. Everything Princess did and said outside the casket—the appearance of General Bey—the battle between Galeen Nuvenberg and Princess—the water flooding into the mausoleum—he grasped every detail.

The casket was jostled about by the force of the water before being swept outside the mausoleum. It floated about for a long time before the currents finally pushed it to the surface. It had arrived at the foot of a cliff.

When the Demon Princess was engulfed with flames, her binding spell on him had fortunately been broken. At the same time, though, the one she'd used on Takako before slipping out of the casket also dissolved. Takako recommenced attacking Setsura.

A little tap was enough to knock her unconscious. He was left with one concern. "Is this thing going to open?" He pressed on the lid above his head. It moved with scarcely any additional pressure. Bright sunlight spilled into the casket. "Today's my lucky day, I guess."

He smiled at the slumbering Takako and sat up. Take away that aura of imperturbable nonchalance and that smile was the personification of a perfect summer day.

"Well, I did want to take a look around."

He opened the lid the rest of the way and climbed out of the

casket. They were indeed at the foot of a craggy cliff. Floating out of the lake, the casket had bobbed to the surface here and snagged on a rock. They were a considerable distance downstream. To the right and to the left was the densely mottled green and brown of the forest.

Setsura scooped Takako out of the casket and proceeded into the trees.

He hadn't figured out how this world was constructed yet, except that all the surrounding land should in one way or another lead to the manor house. So there should be a road or path or something.

He set Takako down against the trunk of a stout oak tree. After probing the surrounding environment with his devil wires, he returned to the casket. Despite being cast into the midst of nature, it maintained a spooky if dignified presence.

"What to do—what to do—"

Setsura tilted his head to the side. However tired and famished he was, the casket aroused a degree of curiosity in the carefree lad that put everything else out of his mind. The invisible knives arced out from his hands, slid without effects off the casket's surface, and were drawn back into his fists.

"I can't cut it after all."

He pondered this a while longer and then went back to the forest. Five minutes later he returned with a chunk of wood. He got a lighter out of his pocket and set it ablaze. The wood was fairly green and took a good ten minutes to produce a strong flame.

Setsura watched over the fire until he heard the flapping of wings overhead. He quickly went back for Takako and scurried for cover. Behind him, came the sound of a big bird alighting on the ground and then taking off again.

"The guy moves fast," he grumbled.

Yakou's voice rang out above him. "Can you hear me, Setsura? Sorry to inform you, but you can't burn Princess's casket so easily. But you did broadcast your whereabouts well enough."

"You don't say," he said to himself.

"Where is Princess?" Yakou said in more pointed tones. "No answer? That is fine with me. In any case, even if you had won possession of her, I would proceed to lay waste to your physical body. For some reason, she's taken a fancy to you. She will surely remonstrate with me later, but if I let you live, you will surely harm her. That is something I cannot allow. Seeing that we once fought nobly together, I will place flowers on your gravestone. Is Takako with you?"

Setsura didn't answer, figuring that Yakou hadn't pinpointed exactly where he was. Pipe up now and *this* Yakou would be all over him in a red-hot second.

"You there or not? If you don't answer, I will assume you aren't there and commence with my attack. If you are, I will give you five beats of my wings. You have until then to come out. Hers is the only life I'll be saving. What about it?"

The whooshing stroke of his wings was very close.

Another one.

And another.

“It’s now or never, Setsura. We didn’t know each other long, but I can say I’m glad I met you.”

And another.

“This is it. Down to vampire hell we go.”

With the fifth stroke of his wings, a copse of trees twenty yards away burst into an orange ball of fire. Napalm. Something Yakou had on hand or Kikiou dreamed up. The oily flames traveled like a quick-moving tide. Setsura threw Takako over his shoulder and started running.

Another burst. Closer. A dozen feet away. It’d be upon them in another second. The six-thousand-degree tongue of fire licking at his heels. An instant later he was airborne. He swung like Tarzan half a dozen feet above the ground with no visible means of support.

He flew through the air, casting a strand of devil wire into the trees in front of him and turning himself into a pendulum. After flying in a zigzag fashion for a hundred more feet, Setsura set down on a tree limb. Despite bearing the weight of two humans, it hardly moved.

He focused his attention on a gap between the trees. In the air forty or fifty yards away he spotted Yakou hovering.

“Overconfidence is your greatest enemy. And the fire is raging.”

Setsura fixed the target in his mind. He’d prefer a fair fight. But

he had this girl on his shoulder he had to save.

"Setsura!" Yakou called out.

Setsura answered with a strand of devil wire. Yakou whirled around and grabbed his shoulder. Blood oozed from between his fingers. The killing blow had missed its objective.

Something must have happened, Setsura's consciousness already being absorbed by the reason of this strange world. Takako fell and landed on the limb where Setsura was standing.

The man dressed in black wavered and faded.

Ah, after resting for several days, the clam at the west entrance of Chuo Park was once again weaving its dreams of Setsura. This time there was nobody else—to defend or destroy the exquisite dream that Setsura had become.

His body glimmered. Bands of light erupted from his back and surged at Yakou. But he flew far away into the sky.

"So that's where he is."

The winged young man took a small flute from the pocket of his suit coat. The shining streamers, the myriad of devil wires lost him and fell back into the forest. And suddenly vanished. General Bey's flute, that had awakened the clam from its dream.

As Setsura stood on top of the thick branch, the dagger-like blades of three shuriken hummed through the air and buried themselves in his solidifying neck.

His eyes lit up with surprise, then lost all the life in them. The

black beauty fell to the earth directly below him. Had the blades not struck home in the instant he'd awakened from the dream, and had Yakou not thrown them from a closer range than any human being could achieve, Setsura would have easily anticipated the attack and dodged it.

Not to mention that, however coincidentally, he had been rescued by the clam's dreams several times already. So there was certain irony in him being undone by those same dreams.

The black slicker twitched slightly as Yakou landed silently beside him. Perhaps because of his confidence in the kill, he did not deliver a *coup de grace*. He nodded. "What a disappointment. Now for that woman."

He looked up.

Takako was still draped over the tree branch. After a moment of thought, he spread his wings and flew up to her and picked her up.

He looked down.

The shadows of the trees played across the prone body. The napalm-fed conflagration pressed ever nearer.

“I believe you’d prefer being laid to rest in some quiet corner of Shinjuku. But you would also want the girl to be returned alive. In any case, being consumed by fire strikes me as a most appropriate fate for such a genie. The same end undoubtedly awaits me. We will meet again in hell!”

He jumped off the branch and shot like an arrow through the forest, unfurling his wings in the blue sky and making a beeline for the manor house.

Embers from the fire rained down on Setsura’s face. He didn’t move. A widening pool of blood from the shurikens spread out under his head. The beautiful genie had surely breathed his last.

Chapter Two

The helicopter made an emergency landing at the Defense Agency heliport just as dawn was breaking. Its one passenger was greeted by ten high officials.

"Welcome, Mayor Kajiwara. I'm Director Yamase."

Kajiwara answered with a firm handshake. On the flight from Galeen Nuvenberg's house to Roppongi, he'd learned that a new director had been appointed that afternoon. The two had never met, but Kajiwara greeted him like an old friend. His were the polished skills of a veteran politician.

When he'd first proposed the meeting over the phone from the helicopter, Yamase pretended to be out of the office, out fighting to make sure the monsters and gremlins in Shinjuku didn't transgress the city boundaries and wreak havoc in the rest of Tokyo.

Now he was all friendly and warm, a different person entirely.

Kajiwara had every reason to believe the director would be here before sunrise, just as he was certain the Defense Agency had been informed of the Pentagon's plans to nuke the city.

Briefcases in their left hands, surrounded by guards, they entered the conference room and seated themselves across the big table from each other.

"They didn't waste any time filling the position," Kajiwara said. He suspected a connection to the previous night's destruction of the

Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex. “The newspapers haven’t been informed, and I’m sure there are members of the cabinet still in the dark.”

“The appointment came as a complete surprise to me as well. The prime minister probably doesn’t know my name yet,” said the director, looking at him.

The man reminded Kajiwara of a large boulder, with eyes like cool porcelain. *This one’ll be a hard nut to crack*, Kajiwara thought to himself.

“I’m sure you’ve seen my dossier. And I know a thing or two about you. I truly appreciate receiving such a warm reception from the man in command of such an amazing city.”

“Thank you.” Kajiwara smiled, a bit too forced perhaps. His opposite here wouldn’t be as easily taken in as the run-of-the-mill pol.

“There is still the business of Demon City’s demons coming here.”

“They are being kept in check,” said Kajiwara, knowing full well how that statement would be answered.

“In check? It hasn’t been thirty minutes since our last contact. And the word then was that nothing was working.”

“A combination of nerve gas, mantras and incantations. That last communication was a little overboard. With this concoction we can hit their central nervous systems. We should have everything under control by tomorrow evening. But I’m calling on you today for a

quite different—and far more serious—reason."

Kajiwara expected a reaction, but the stalwart middle-aged man was as unmoved as a chunk of granite.

"And what would that be?"

"Today—to be more precise, likely last night—a plan was made operational by the U.S. Department of Defense. I would like to see it belayed immediately."

No need to beat around the bush. Kajiwara didn't know exactly when the attack would come, but his burning intuition was that it was coming soon.

"A Pentagon strategy?" Yamase said at last, furrowing his brows. If nothing else, the man could act.

"No need to play dumb," Kajiwara said. All he had going for him right now was persistence—keep pounding on that chunk of granite until it started to chip. "I am not boasting when I say that the city I am responsible for does not operate by the same rules as the average metropolis. To start with, Shinjuku maintains the necessary information networks that its unique nature demands. An extraordinary place often requires extraordinary measures."

"The Defense Agency's intelligence arm bows to no one in that regard," Director Yamase said with a scowl. "I should like to meet these tellers of such tall tales."

"Director, this is not a problem that can be dealt with using bluffs and feints. This concerns the lives of the three hundred thousand residents of Shinjuku."

“Mayor Kajiwara, nothing personal, but you do seem a bit tuckered out.”

“I am as perfectly fit as always. No mayor could serve Shinjuku for a single day otherwise. Do you think I requisitioned a helicopter and came to see you at the break of dawn so we could share dreams and fantasies?”

“I did not live to the age I am by only looking upright men in the face.”

“Taking out a city with a nuclear missile—surely the kind of thing that none but upright men could imagine.”

“Mayor, do you have any idea how nonsensical the words coming out of your mouth are?”

“My head has never been clearer than on this night,” Kajiwara shot back. Falter for a moment or show the slightest hesitation and the game would be over.

The director leaned back in his chair. A more inviting atmosphere flowed back into the room, evidence that he was recognizing the strength of the hand Kajiwara held. A point for the mayor.

“Do you have any physical evidence that Shinjuku is being targeted with a nuclear missile?”

Kajiwara suppressed a smile. He’d seen this one coming a mile away. The director wasn’t playing dumb. He was fishing for information that could pin down the identity of Kajiwara’s mole. A perfectly normal strategy. If this was the way his mind worked, then Kajiwara should be able to find a crack in the stone wall.

“You and the prime minister are well aware of the evidence. That is all I have to say.”

“In that case, I can only call it a mad delusion. Otherwise, Mr. Mayor, this is the kind of thing that will just have to be reported through the regular channels.”

“That would be *after* the mushroom cloud rises over Shinjuku, Director? Your extermination efforts won’t end without involving all of Shinjuku’s neighbors. If a single bomb could do the trick, Demon City wouldn’t deserve the name.”

Kajiwara sensed a shock coursing through Yamase’s frame. His stony surface was turning back into human skin. This was the opening he needed.

“When it comes to any threats to the outside world, the appropriate authorities in Shinjuku will take full responsibility and deal with them. For the time being, I think everybody needs to calm down and take a few deep breaths and rethink any drastic measures.”

Kajiwara bowed his head for a long time.

“C’mon, you don’t need to do that,” the director said. “The fact is, I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about. More than anything else I can do for you, what I think you need is rest.”

Kajiwara slowly raised his head. “So you’re not going to see things my way no matter what?”

“Well—”

Kajiwara placed the briefcase on top of the table. At the same

time, the door opened with unusual alacrity and armed security guards surrounded him.

"Place your hands on the table," Yamase ordered.

"Relax. I'm not so stupid as to walk into the Defense Agency carrying a bomb. Besides, I can honestly say I'm the best mayor the citizens of my city could hope to have at the moment, and it'd be a terrible shame to lose me. Nevertheless, if I try anything funny, feel free to shoot away. Though I'm sure you'd regret it afterwards."

Director Yamase thought it over. He said, "Take five steps back."

The security guards complied.

"All right. Let's see what is worth risking your life over."

"Thank you."

Kajiwara opened the briefcase. He reached in and took out a thickly padded cylinder. The lid was held shut with large springs. As he went to open it, the guards leaned forward, their 5.56 mm submachine guns aimed at his chest.

As he lifted the lid, releasing a puff of white water vapor, those fingers were itching at the triggers.

"Take it easy."

Kajiwara smiled and opened the lid the rest of the way. He tipped the cylinder forward. Seeing the object wobble across the table top, everybody there thought the same thing.

Four inches in diameter and ten inches long—it was an egg.

Chapter Three

The director looked quizzically at Kajiwara. “And that is?”

“An egg.”

“I can tell that. What kind of egg? Some creature from Demon City?”

“Correct. Though the parents are unknown.”

“Hatch it and you’ll find out soon enough.”

“This egg isn’t going to hatch—probably not during my lifetime.”

Observing the security guards exchanging glances, the director thought it might be best not to overplay his hand in the bluff and awe department.

“That’s a remarkable egg. Why can’t it be hatched?”

“I don’t know. I suppose because whatever’s inside isn’t eager to come out. I can imagine that the time a child spends in his mother’s womb, no matter the species, is the most felicitous time of its life.”

The director smiled thinly. “And this knowledge comes to you how?”

“Excuse the supposition.” Kajiwara reached into his suit coat pocket and took out a small flask. He spilled a bit of the clear liquid onto his palm. “Dye remover,” he said.

The guards became aware that their guns were no longer aimed in

any particular direction. Kajiwara's patter was obviously just that, and yet they were captivated by the aura of Demon City Shinjuku.

Kajiwara wiped his hands together and combed them through his hair. In a flash, the black hair turned white.

"Director, how old are you?"

"I turned sixty this year."

"I am fifty-three. But if you looked only at my hair, you would think me the same age as your father." The effect was like striking a silent gong. "Three years ago, my hair was the color you would expect of a man my age. And then I witnessed the incubation of this egg at a private biological laboratory."

"You saw what was inside it?"

"No. I was shown something else."

"What? By whom?"

"Probably by what is in the egg. A dream."

"A dream?"

"A dream dreamed by what is inside." Kajiwara examined the intrigued faces around him. "These men are still young. They should withdraw. Nightmares are for old men. Don't worry. There's no risk to life or limb. The burden has not proved unbearable—so far. Or are they too scared stiff to object, I wonder?"

"I won't pretend to understand what you're saying, but fine. Everybody leave the room."

“But—” protested the guard captain. Yamase only held up his hand and he acquiesced. The guards nodded and exited the room.

When the door to the conference room closed behind them, one of the guards said, “Are you sure this is okay, captain?”

“Director’s orders. End of discussion.”

“Director. What happened to Director Negishi?”

Everybody nodded at the mention of Yamase’s predecessor.

“I don’t know. According to the rumors—”

At that moment, the door opened. “Director!” the captain shouted, running up to the uniformed man staggering out of the conference room. “What happened?”

Director Yamase tried to free himself from the supporting hands but lacked the strength. “I’m okay. See to the mayor. As for putting the egg back in the case—leave that to him. After that—no—leave it at that.”

The captain couldn’t decide how to respond. He was looking at the director’s head. His black hair had turned white as snow. In the meantime, the guards who charged into the conference room found the pale mayor slumped on the table. They took a SIG Sauer P220 semi-automatic from his hand.

Afterwards, they learned that the director had given it to him to try and break the egg. The hammer was cocked back and there was a round in the chamber, but no sign of it being fired.

Taking Kajiwara’s pulse, the captain muttered, “The dream—”

“Call the prime minister,” the director groaned as he was escorted down the hallway. But then he shook his head and added, “No. No need. Even if that dream becomes reality, the order must be executed.”

Yakou brought Takako to Mephisto’s room as soon as he returned to the manor house.

“So you won?” said the white-caped doctor, not bothering to look at him. A rainbow of colors played on the table in front of him.

“One way or another.” Yakou added with undisguised sarcasm, “That drug of yours really came through for me.”

“And how is Setsura doing?”

“He should be turning to ash about now.”

“That’s an awfully confident statement.”

“I guess.”

“Did you actually witness him turning to ash?”

“Not exactly.” Yakou furrowed his brow.

“In Demon City, it takes more than a long life to make a career.” Mephisto held up the object he was working on. A human arm, from the elbow on down. “This completes it. On to my next commission.”

Yakou watched without comment.

“This girl—set her down over there.”

The white finger indicated an operating table in a nook of the stone wall. Feeling it easier to go along than be contrarian, Yakou

complied.

“Come over here.”

The two faced each other across the big table. Yakou asked, a searching air in his voice and eyes, “Doctor, do you believe in Setsura?”

“In what regard, specifically?”

“Everything.”

“Hard to say.”

“Don’t try to evade the question, please.”

“No matter how much you may want to believe in them, there are men who do not allow themselves to be believed in.”

“He is dead, whether or not you wish to believe that. What would you say if the dead man was standing in front of you?”

“Setsura Aki is dead?” Mephisto took a bunch of white flowers from within his cape. The pretty moon lilies looked faded and rather sad—compared to the fingers that held them.

“These were given to me by a man concerned for your welfare. However, the you that you are right now does not deserve them. Nonetheless, I cannot refuse a request from him. How do you think Doctor Mephisto should handle a man who has become prisoner to a woman?”

Yakou trembled. The product of fear and pleasure. He couldn’t allow himself to acknowledge it. He existed only for Princess, body and soul.

“Taken in by a woman, and in the throes of that infatuation, inspired to kill Setsura, and then come to me and brag about it. A reward is in order.”

“What would that be?” sneered Yakou. Then he shuddered, anticipating what manner of reward it might indeed prove to be.

The white flowers vanished within Mephisto’s grasp. He’d crushed them, the petals clinging to his hand before falling like snow. He’d apparently consigned Setsura’s request to dust as well. He pointed at the wall where Takako lay. “A punishment fitting for a man hell-bent on his woman. Come out, General Bey.”

His voice was answered with a growl, like a fierce beast rudely awakened from a slumber. A shadow fell across Yakou’s face. He went to jump aside as fingers like the gnarled limbs of an old tree clamped down on his shoulder.

“Kazikli Bey!” Yakou’s breath was sucked back into his befanged mouth.

A tear in the darkness. White clouds floated across a blue sky. Had he finally found his way home? But his memories quickly returned. Setsura stood up. The air was hot. His throat was dry.

To his left and a hundred yards deeper in, the forest was burning. All around him was sandy soil. Immediately to his right a river flowed. Clearly somebody had transported him here.

Setsura turned in a circle. At the foot of some black, moss-covered rocks lay a woman in a skirt.

As he ran over to Galeen Nuvenberg, the look on his face was

something other than human. No one could have supposed that such an easygoing man was capable of such an expression. He seized the old woman's hand—like a piece of withered wood—and checked for a pulse. He touched her temple. And then her neck.

He felt nothing. Setsura's eyes focused on the arm by her side and what was in her clenched hand. Two bloody shuriken. He touched his own neck. Somebody had removed the weapon, staunched the blood, and carried him here.

A breeze wafted across the corpse of the Czech Republic's greatest wizardess. The sound of the water never ended, nor would the light shining down ever cease.

Setsura turned the old woman's small body onto her back. A shuriken glittered in her chest. She used the third one on herself, in order to frustrate a fate as General Bey's servant.

No marks remained in her throat.

"You have left me with a debt I cannot repay," Setsura softly said to her pale, wax-like face. "I will be sure to take you back with me to that city. But please be patient and wait a while first."

He pulled out the shuriken and folded her hands across her chest. He should say a prayer for her. Then remembered he didn't know any. He had the feeling he'd once been taught one, but couldn't remember it.

Setsura stood up. The wind tousled his hair. He turned to the sound of the water and set off toward its source.

A path came into view soon after entering the forest. Above his

head and beneath his feet he sensed things of unknown origin approaching. Scurrying away before making contact, but leaving behind buffeting wakes of the ghastly and the weird.

He'd walked for half an hour when the ruins appeared before him. Walls and stairs of stacked stones and packed earth, the footings of the towers engulfed in wild green. The parapets faced the river, suggesting the fortress was built to defend against an attack from the water.

A flight of stairs followed alongside the far wall, where the path also continued. The stone staircase descended from where Setsura stood, disappearing into the blue-green water filling the stronghold of the fort. The remains of what appears to be floodgates arose from that point.

Setsura continued straight ahead. A step ahead of him was a thirty-foot abyss. He strode unconcerned across empty space. He'd come to the center of the abyss when *something* fell on him.

First a right arm, and then a left arm, a right leg, a left leg, and a headless torso blocked his path, unscathed by the touch of his devil wires, perfectly perched and balanced on the invisible tightrope. He heard laughter from above as the last object fell onto his feet—Galeen Nuvenberg's head.

The derisive glee now came from in front of him. Setsura looked up from the appalling gifts. Princess's white sleeves fluttered in the air a dozen feet away.

"The fate of she who came to save you."

The high, loud peals suddenly stopped, as did the sound of the wind and the birds. Time itself seemed to come to a halt.

Setsura Aki said, “Did you come here to shorten your own life? Or only to meet *me*?”

Part Ten: Princess Sings the Blues

Chapter One

Princess froze. A cold sheen of fear colored her features, perhaps the first time she had tasted such an emotion.

"So *you* are here too, Setsura."

Her voice seemed very far away. Strangely enough, even drowning in terror, the Demon Princess was at the heights of arousal. Her heaven-favored face and the root of its beauty shone forth like that of the chemist staring at a lump of radium.

"I am so happy to meet you. You should understand what is in my heart right now."

She pressed her fingers against her bountiful breasts. A crimson line arose on her wrist, as if erupting from within. The line thickened and the hand slid away from the rest of the arm. She caught it—severed by invisible knives—with her other hand and returned it to the wrist. When the Demon Princess licked away the blood, there wasn't a mark left on the white skin.

"Mine resembles General Bey's regenerative powers but is my own home-grown specialty. It is frightening, making the blood flow forth like that. I don't think General Bey could recover from the likes of this."

"He comes next," Setsura quietly said. "But you first. Cleaved apart by the justice of these threads, you can wait for General Bey to join you."

The air hummed. A rainbow of light split the clear air. Princess leapt backwards. In a flash she was twenty feet into the air. “Wait!” she cried out.

Perhaps such desperation in such a proud woman threw off his timing. Perhaps Setsura’s hand was stayed by the confidence that this time she had no place to run and no place to hide.

“You would do well to wait. Kill me—if you ever could—and you will never leave here alive. Kikiou wouldn’t allow it. Or Takako Kanan.”

Setsura’s eyes flicked downward at the head of the old woman, her eyes shut.

“I know but one fate.”

As he spoke, a spray of red erupted from her neck. This time she made no attempt to stop it. The blood rained down, soaking her body like a misty shower.

“Hoh, do you hate me that much? The more the better. That is *my* desire. Your anger is the sweetest elixir of all. It makes my heart race. Your pain is the music of hell that makes my blood boil. Your suffering is the song of Hades that rings with ecstasy in my soul. Before doing anything rash, you should listen to this first.”

Princess reached with her right hand into her dress and took it out. How could such a horrifying demoness exhibit such grace and beauty in so simple a movement? The pale hand held a glimmering red and golden embroidered bag.

Setsura could begin to imagine what it held. She tossed it into

the air. It could hardly hold much, but as if being drawn up by an invisible thread, it rose a dozen yards above his head and opened.

What it brought forth shook the heavens and the earth and raised the hair on the back of the neck. The voices of men and women and old and young, thousands upon thousands crying out, and their resounding echoes answering back.

The blue sky did not change, nor did the drifting clouds. Nor did the rustling wind or the golden rays of the sun. But any living thing hearing them would plug his ears to halt the pain. If he could not deafen himself at once, he would die in agony from the sound. The shattering screams would destroy the souls of any living thing.

And mingled among them, Setsura Aki could make out the cries of Takako Kanan.

“I have many more like that one.” The Demon Princess shrieked with laughter, her scorn cutting through the cacophony. “The voices of those who cursed and reviled me as I destroyed them. And this is only the most recent bag. Did you hear her, Setsura? There’s no plugging your ears, now.”

Princess raised her bloody right hand and brought it sharply against her own throat like a stiletto. Blood blossomed against the blue sky.

Setsura detected an abrupt change in Takako. The expected fear, but also a new scream of pain. The crimson flowers fluttered, the myriad of bloody petals scattered and danced in the air. Princess laughed her shrill laugh.

“Hoh. You understand, Setsura? Kill me and you kill her. That is what becomes of those whose blood I drink. Knowing that, will you follow through?”

There was no lack of confidence in her words. She was not lying. A faltering look passed across Setsura’s countenance. He didn’t cast out another devil wire attack. “Where is Kanan-san?” he asked, his cool voice tinged by distress.

“Oh, yes. Judging by where her cries are coming from, a room in my manor house. Rest assured she has not yet become fish food.”

“With Mephisto, then?”

“Probably. Most likely.” Speaking the frightening reality she added, “But the good doctor is presently one of us.”

“And just in time, Princess,” Setsura said, even gently.

“You don’t mean—” she started to say.

As her mouth closed on the last syllable, her lips split in two. The beautiful red line ran from the top of her head to her crotch. Her round breasts sprang into view—followed by her glistening flat belly and bush—as her robes divided and fell away.

The red line grew thicker. Ah, the two halves of her were slipping vertically past each other. Setsura Aki’s fearsome devil wire. Would his clear and shining countenance watch over yet another death?

But if the scene were not already strange enough, a new grotesqueness was soon added to it. Her two arms hugged the two halves of her together. Setsura observed dispassionately as the arm of

the half sliding down pressed down on the torso opposite and the two halves melted back together.

This time she didn't wipe away the blood or smile. Her face was ashen, and not only from anger. The roiling pain as well. Setsura's devil wire would not be scorned.

"Bastard!" was the severed woman's first word. "Bastard! Look at what you did to me! It would take the fingers of both hands to count the glorious kingdoms I have destroyed. That fucking hurt! You're not getting away with this!"

Princess's body shook. Her arms were still wrapped hard around her. She was clearly holding herself together—literally. This was the figure of a woman steeling herself against paroxysms of anger. What manner of retribution could such fury transform into? And how would Setsura Aki reply to such an attack?

The Demon Princess raised her right hand. The firmament shook. A black veil covered the world. Dark clouds swirled across the sky like endless whirlpools of mud.

Setsura Aki narrowed his eyes. It was as if the stage suddenly went dark, with a single spotlight on him, in the center of the world. He looked at Princess, who was staring up at the sky in blank amazement. Had not this apocalypse been brought about by her wizardry?

The ground shook beneath his feet. The walls of the fortress fell like dominoes. The water sluiced through the dikes like a black storm surge and swallowed up the ruins.

Unable to maintain his balance, Setsura pivoted to the right while throwing a strand of devil wire into the woods beyond. He felt a strange response. No sooner had it become clear that he wouldn't reach his objective than he was seized by an overwhelming force and drawn body and soul into the encompassing darkness.

"Son of a bitch!" Princess cried out.

But from the way she said it, this expression of disbelief could not be aimed solely at Setsura's sudden disappearance. Her eyes frantically searched her surroundings as she soared high into the sky, darting to the left and right in a haphazard fashion, as if afraid of being touched by that invisible *something*.

She arrived back at the manor house five minutes later. Coming through the front door she roared, "Kikiou!"

She knew he had no arms or legs. Even so, when called, he must appear in a flash. That was the law in this world.

The great hall trembled and she stomped through and into the corridor. Above her head hummed the sound of wings. The figure in the long gray robes followed up at the rear.

"Princess—what happened!" Kikiou asked, now right behind her.

He sported a white beard like a mountain goat, his hands and feet sprouting from the gray robes, a staff in his hand—the same old warlock as before.

"Setsura got away," Princess said, grinding her teeth.

"Did he inflict those wounds?"

“Who else? And they hurt, damn it! Hurry up and treat them.”

“Understood. But what about Setsura?”

“This anomaly.” The eyes of the Demon Princess brimmed with the fires of hell. She looked up into the air. “That bastard was sucked into a vortex. Based on past experience, he must have been thrown out of here. Under no circumstances can he be allowed to escape. Where is Takako Kanan?”

“With Mephisto,” said Yakou from above.

“What is that quack doing?”

“Twenty or thirty minutes ago, Takako suddenly vomited blood. When Mephisto examined her, there was nothing wrong with her. Princess, that wasn’t the work of her sire?”

Not answering Yakou’s question, Princess sank into a moment of contemplative silence.

“But of course. So that bastard Setsura slashed you?”

“Kikiou, do you understand what caused it?” They’d arrived outside Mephisto’s laboratory.

“Yes,” he said with a bow of his bald head.

“Then go get rid of it. Yakou, you go with him. Find Setsura Aki and bring him back to me alive. Do you hear me? Do not kill him. Return with enough of him left to feel plenty of pain.”

“Yes.”

“Get out of here.”

“In that case—” Neither of them had spoken. The door had opened before even Princess noticed. Three pairs of eyes reflected the statue-like image of the man standing there. “If Setsura is the man you are after, then he is the one you should bring with.”

Behind him was the looming silhouette of General Bey.

“Not him,” Princess spat out. Far more than her tone of voice, a murderous light burned in her eyes. “So you’re still alive? The idiot who destroyed my mausoleum over a girl. I could annihilate you a hundred times over and not grow tired of watching you die. I’d happily draw and quarter you here and now. No. It’s better this way. Setsura and the girl he came to rescue—how about popping off their heads while keeping them alive? You’re capable of something like that, aren’t you, Mephisto?”

“More or less.” Mephisto looked calmly at Princess. “You have already perceived my control of the girl and the general. In that respect, I have a proposal for you.”

“What?”

“Add these two to the posse pursuing Setsura. I am sure the spectacle will unfold to your liking.”

“No,” she said with the sharpness of an icy north wind. “This hick of a traitorous soldier and the girl being sought by the man who left me in this state? Do you think I would let either out of my grasp? As soon as these wounds heal, I will kill him by inches. Or tear him a new one and pour in molten iron. Mephisto—undo whatever you’ve done to them.”

“The girl has been commanded to turn Setsura into a vampire.”

“What!”

“And if she fails, General Bey will kill her and then eradicate Setsura.”

Princess was at a loss for words.

They all shook. A rumble from deep within the earth, as if to toss them off their feet. No one paid it any mind. Even in the eyes of these demons who could shake Demon City to its foundations, the white-clad doctor remained a mystery wrapped in an enigma.

Nothing was out of the ordinary here. Mephisto’s blood had been taken by Ryuuki. He was one of them. And yet, the Demon Physician’s words and actions sent cold fingers of foreboding down the backs of Kikiou and Yakou. And even Princess.

“General Bey is attached to this girl. As is Setsura. But knowing that Takako has not only Setsura’s life but his soul in her sights, there is no way that Setsura can risk taking her for granted. At the same time, she has not become a vampire *in toto*. Setsura would otherwise have no qualms about taking her head. He is a frightening man when it comes to things like that.”

Nobody answered. It was indeed frightening. Mephisto’s words hit home.

“On the other hand, this would fan the flames of General Bey’s ardor for the girl all the more. And yet his hand is stayed in that sense as well. Wouldn’t he find himself in a deeper hell? He must watch as the object of his affection is pursued by a far more

handsome young suitor, and one brimming with life. Not only can he not ride to the rescue, but he would be compelled to kill his mistress should she fail. I can say with certainty that Setsura will not be killed by this girl. Nor can Setsura dispose of her. Then who will? Will Princess shed tears for the general's feelings as he rips out her throat?"

"I would gladly weep bloody tears for him." A look of evil joy unlike anything moral beings could experience suffused her face. It bordered on the sublime. "You have thought this through well. My hat's off to you."

Mephisto accepted the compliment with a slight bow.

"There is one problem, though."

"Oh?"

"Be it a one in a million chance, but what if the girl should actually kill Setsura? It seems to me that that tying everything up in a nice little bow like that would rather spoil the fun."

Mephisto answered in the same tone of voice, "In that case, then General Bey would have his hands around her neck."

"Well, you certainly thought of everything." The Demon Princess smiled at the two behind her, a smile like the glistening petals of a gorgeous but deadly belladonna. "You heard what he said. Just what we should expect from Doctor Mephisto. This man could make the sun rise in the west. Very good. First, you will do everything in your power to assist these two in finding Setsura. But you will do nothing more. At that point you will stand down. Everything will be left to

them. Intervene only if both of them fail."

"But, Princess—" Kikiou objected. Yakou hovered in the air and said nothing.

Kikiou continued, "As I have said on many occasions, Setsura Aki is an accursed star from which no good can come. He can tie us in knots with a single strand of that devil wire. That we have yet to take his head should be proof enough. Princess, even General Bey—to say nothing of this girl—found Setsura too difficult to kill, not to mention bringing him back alive. Combining our strengths here and now, we can bring his existence to a speedy end. That should be our first priority. Only then can we make this city the base from which we will plunge the world into blood and darkness."

"An end to his existence? Please. The sooner the better. But by *my* hand. The man who cut me without so much as a by-your-leave? The man ridicules me by his very presence, slipping out of my grasp again and again. Not you, Kikiou. Not Yakou. Not even General Bey shall be allowed. I'll say it once again. I will tolerate no deviation from what has been explained to you here. Bring Setsura Aki back here alive."

"Princess," Kikiou said again. "Do you really intend to destroy him once he's brought back here?"

"What did you say?" Princess demanded, her eyes narrowing to slits.

Kikiou backed away, fear filling his features. He had tested her limits and opposed her on many an occasion, but the cold bath of terror he felt then was nothing like the gruesome sense of foreboding

he felt now.

“What did you say?”

Kikiou swallowed hard. The arms and legs Mephisto had made for him might well be for naught, but he steeled his resolve. “Princess, I am asking whether you intend to end Setsura’s life or not.”

“Not.”

“Are you mad?”

“I do not intend to kill him. Did you think I did? Did you think I could? To die is to sleep, perchance to dream. Setsura Aki will taste eternal torments, wide awake forever. Hungering for blood, his body will burn while the marrow of his bones turns to ice until the end of time. You should understand. As my slave, he will live a never-ending living death.”

“Still stuck on that.” Kikiou bit his lip. “Princess, have you forgotten how we have journeyed across thousands of years? Over and over we have been seduced by the blood that flows through human history, and every time, sealed away for centuries. To what ends have we observed and gathered knowledge from within this world I constructed, and then come to this city? In order to make the dreams coursing through our blood real. Anything that frustrates those dreams must be dealt with, no matter what form it presents itself in, even that unlucky star.”

“Those dreams are your dreams.” Princess laughed out loud. The manor house itself seemed to lean away from the sound of her voice.

“I dream no such dreams, nor do I wish for their fulfillment. The ways you and I live our lives have nothing to do with each other. I think only Shuuran understood that. I’ve allowed you to accompany me only because I have no good reason not to. My interest in this world or the world out there merely comes down to what holds my interest. The name of the cord binding my interest right now is Setsura Aki.”

She barked, “Kikiou—”

Perhaps it was his four thousand years of experience with the supernatural that made the great warlock step back and prostrate himself.

“That is all I have to say on the subject. Bring Setsura Aki back here.”

“Understood.”

The great warlock groveled on the ground like a crab.

Chapter Two

The rain poured down like a roaring waterfall, the raindrops all but carving holes in the concrete and asphalt, and painting Demon City in the chiaroscuro shades of an India ink landscape.

A man stopped next to the high wall adjacent to the west entrance of Chuo Park. In the morning light—so subdued that a drunk would wake up after a bender thinking it was dusk and go back to sleep—a human figure drifted toward him like a gray ghost.

The man considered the time and the place and looked for somewhere to hide. The pelting rain raised a white mist on the hood of his vinyl raincoat and the pack on his back. His face and frame resembled a sturdy concrete block.

He remembered a pile of actual concrete blocks a dozen feet behind him. He spun around and circled behind it. He got a cattle prod out of the pack. It wasn't electric, but a five-foot polymer model that used ultrasonic waves, effective in wet weather for collecting sprites and the smaller monsters and demons.

Creatures flocked to the DMZ that were out of the ordinary even for Shinjuku. Their numbers swelled particularly at dawn and at dusk. The man's job was trapping and capturing certain species from among them. The bag was already squirming with a good twenty.

The tottering shadow passed by six feet or so in front of him. The man jumped up and cried out in a schoolgirlish voice totally at odds

with his physiognomy, “Aki-chan! Setsura-kun, is that you?”

The comely silhouette didn’t turn to face him. But the man fearlessly ran up to him and spun him around. “Hey, it’s me! Hamada from the Mad Men Society. You found Haruko when she ran away from home. I’ve so been wanting to see you again!”

Even shaken by the shoulders, Setsura did not focus his attention on the square, flushed face. Far from it, the lanky young man kept on going, dragging the two-hundred-pound Hamada along with him.

His eyes were vacant. He’d been sucked through a wormhole in the spacetime that separated the world of the Demon Princess from here, unharmed except for the apparent loss of his consciousness. But that seemed to have released the shackles imposed on his physical self by his mental state—an odd byproduct that allowed his muscles and sinews to function under their own power.

“Hey, what’s up with you? Somebody hypnotize you? You hook up with those night crawlers? That can’t be, wandering around at this time in the morning. No matter. Let me take you home.” He said, as if he’d just come up with a great idea, his voice as cloyingly sweet as honey on jam, “No, you must come to *my* home.”

Then he remembered that when he’d shaken Setsura, he seemed to be carrying something on his left side. Hamada looked down and squealed, “What—what’s that? The head of an old woman? Baby, when did you turn into a head hunter?”

“Head hunter” was the occupation of an infamous band of psychopaths who wandered the Shinjuku nights in search of fresh skulls.

“Oh, ick!” he shrieked in a feminine manner. “Throw that thing away!”

He tried to take it from him, but Setsura had a grip on the silver hair he couldn’t budge. His right hand swung up and delivered a karate chop to Hamada’s neck.

He staggered, collected himself, and let out a long breath and smiled. Rubbing the bruise he said sweetly, “Nice one. Right where it counts. Aw, such talents wasted on a mere P.I.” Watching Setsura hug the skull to his chest he said, “I get it. She must be a real important old lady. Well, that’s okay too. You and the head, rest easy and leave everything to me!”

He nodded at the dripping-wet handsome man. Moving him by the shoulders, he guided him along like an overbearing mother in charge of a toddler. “This way. No, not that way. This way.”

Perhaps detecting no danger in him, Setsura didn’t resist and did as he was told. Like a pair of lovers out for a stroll on a stormy day, the two disappeared into the rain.

Less than an hour later, four figures appeared in the exact same spot where Hamada had run into Setsura.

“Here?” said Yakou, his wings folded across his back.

“No doubt about it,” answered Kikiou. “We’ll run into each other soon enough.”

He was carrying a square metal case two feet by two feet. He lifted up the staff in his other hand, waved it through the air, and then planted it on the ground. “This way. I can feel it, the remnants

of Ryuuki's demon *qi*. He can run but he can't hide from me."

"Good," said Yakou. He turned to the two behind him, General Bey and Takako. "Your turn is coming up. General Bey is General Bey, but the girl is rather pitiful."

A small, pained look came to his face. *Pitiful* hardly described it. This was Takako, whom he'd once sworn to protect. Princess had turned his heart to stone, but either she'd done a half-assed job of it or the force of Yakou's personality was reasserting itself. Either way, he'd been raised to be a good English gentleman and some gentlemanly aspect of that upbringing must still persist.

Kikiou looked at him and said, a critical note in his voice, "Exactly."

"What is?"

"That girl—making her the vanguard in capturing Setsura is pitiful, don't you think? Mephisto and Princess are calculating that he'll keep his hands off her. But that man is not only a citizen of Demon City, but something even more terrifying than that. Not a person easily understood. Succeed or fail, General Bey is supposed to pick up the pieces. But that as well is a wager I would not make. And can you be sure that, should the girl be killed, Setsura would not turn on us in a fury?"

"I don't disagree," Yakou said with a thin smile. His wet hair was plastered against his forehead. The drumming rain posed no great obstacle to these four. "So, what should we do next?"

"Nothing. As Princess ordered."

Kikiou flashed a perfunctory smile and glanced at the general and girl behind him. These two were a perfect fit for the Demon City rain. Two points of red light shone from the face shrouded in the dim and smoky darkness. General Bey's eyes.

And the pale face of Takako Kanan projecting from the transparent gray curtain of rain, wrapped in the ghostly white shroud.

Kikiou shifted his gaze to Yakou, and then to the eastern sky. “We should be on our way, but it is already morning. These two must rest. I have prepared a shadow box, but in this city opportunistic thieves abound. We need to find a safe place. Tell me, Yakou, how shall we while away the time until the night falls?”

“Confirm Setsura’s location and make sure he cannot flee elsewhere. I’m sure we can handle that by ourselves.”

“Happily,” said Kikiou, tenting his fingers together. “Well, Doctor Mephisto, you are turning out as I expected. Very smartly done. I intend to test the limits of just how useful you will turn out to be.”

Chapter Three

"That was fast."

She confirmed his face through the peephole and smiled. Hamada had gotten back from gremlin hunting early today. They'd be able to eat breakfast together for a change.

Playing it safe, though, she got the Ruger P22 off the shoe shelf. There was always the possibility that a competing gang was trying to strong-arm him. And there were plenty of others who were plain jealous of her—though she didn't worry about them too much.

She opened the door and stared in surprise. "What in the world—!" Perhaps for the first time in her life she was at a loss for a snappy reply.

Her yakuza had come home bearing a striking portrait. Except that the figure wrapped in the black slicker had bulk and weight. And a haunting bad vibe. No human angel could be so beautiful.

"What you staring at? Though I suppose it's no wonder. Put down the gun at least. And get out of that negligee and put on something decent. We've got a guest."

The man barking out these orders was the same Hamada. His face and throaty masculine voice now filled with the substance and gravitas that a first impression would have led anyone to expect.

"I owe this guy a lot. Gotta do right by him. Spare nothing until he's back to his normal self."

“Fine with me,” she said, making her way to where Setsura and Hamada were standing. “Such a nice-looking man. Why haven’t you introduced us before?” she whined.

“Idiot. Ain’t the kind of guy you introduce to a yakuza’s floozy. Just take a look at him.”

“You have a point. Hey, mister,” she said with clumsy politeness. “Won’t you please come in?”

Her contours of her breasts and bottom—tightly covered by a pair of black panties—were visible through the lace negligee, a fact that didn’t appear to arouse in her the slightest bit of self-consciousness. When confronted by a guy this good-looking, bashfulness went out the window.

“He possessed by something?”

“Looks like it. Let’s lie him down and call the doc.”

They sat the vacant-eyed Setsura down in the kitchen and stripped the bed, changing the sheets and pillowcases. They considered undressing Setsura, but that seemed a—sacrilege. Encouraged by Hamada, Setsura obediently lay down.

“What’s his problem? You think he got dumped by a girl and took it real bad?”

“Don’t be silly. He ain’t me. Anyway, go get Doctor Saionji.”

Saionji was the head of the residential hospital fifty yards or so down the street. The woman came back with him thirty minutes later. She gave Hamada a sharp look and said, “You better not have gotten

any funny ideas while I was gone."

But the best doctor in Kawadacho's up and coming redevelopment zone couldn't restore Setsura to normal.

"So what do we do?"

To the yakuza's question, the amiable doctor said, "The best thing we can do for him now is take him to Mephisto Hospital."

"You're probably right. But there's bad blood in them parts with me and mine."

"The director of the hospital doesn't care about things like that. He treats all of his patients the same. He's no do-gooder. Because he's a different sort of bird altogether."

"Still leaves me in something of a bind, getting in and out of another gang's territory."

"Or a good witch or warlock or apothecary in Takada no Baba. There's a few I could introduce you to."

"Sounds like a plan."

The doctor got out a prescription pad. Scribbling a note with a ballpoint pen, he glanced at the bag next to the headboard of the bed. "What's that?"

"Ah, um, a watermelon."

They'd taken the head from Setsura and put it in a grocery bag together with a freezer pack. They weren't about to say it was a woman's head.

After the doctor left, the woman asked, “What do we do next?”

“No choice. Take him to Takada no Baba.”

“What about your gang’s mob doctor, you know, the guy who teaches *qigong* breathing techniques?”

“Oh, yeah. You mean Doctor Hokorin.”

“He’d be perfect. I’ve heard his *qigong* is the best way to cure stuff that’s wrong with your head. Tell him if he fixes this guy, I’ll give him a freebie. He’s guaranteed to come up with a cure.”

“Great idea!” Hamada clapped his hands. Though when he paused to think for a second, he couldn’t let it get around that he was pimping out his girlfriend for favors. What he really wanted to do was keep Setsura here and nurse him back to health himself.

“Give it up, dear.” The woman leaned against his shoulder. She said, as if reading his mind, “Looks like that’d be too much for you, too. It’s not even on a human scale. While you’re down here working up a sweat just to make your little gang break even, he’s heading to the stars. Me, I’m the best thing you’ve got going. Let’s hurry and fix him up.”

While she was talking, the yakuza closed his eyes and listened. He sighed and nodded. “You’re right. Sooner the better. We’ll head over to headquarters for a while. The rain seems to have let up.”

He left with Setsura. Two hours later, the woman went to the kitchen and was astounded to see an old man with a white beard standing in the foyer.

“Who the hell are you and how did you get in here?” The intruder alarm at the front door was still armed.

The old man looked around and said, “Where is Setsura?”

The demonic glow in his eyes was an ill match for his otherwise well-bred features. The woman didn’t answer and instead yanked the flame thrower off the wall. She pulled on the trigger. The igniter flashed. An oily tongue of flame licked out six feet in front of her.

The old man didn’t appear startled in the least. He held out his left hand, at a right angle to the floor, the palm facing her.

“Die, you old geezer.”

His hand blocked the flames shooting toward his chest. The fire reversed course and plunged on the same trajectory back into the nozzle. Instantly, the weapon was literally hoisted on its own petard. The fuel tank and the flame thrower resting against her hip exploded.

Her skin scalded, and her hair lit up as the temperature reached six thousand degrees. Her body groaned. The waves of heat suddenly withdrew. He was holding her. As she struggled against his embrace, she noticed—the upper half of her body still burning like a torch.

And she could clearly hear the sound of the rain outside the window. That was when she screamed.

“You don’t feel it because of me,” said Kikiou, tightening his arms around her slender waist. “But the flames are consuming your skin and flesh as we speak. Here, I’ll show you—”

The white-hot heat scorched her to the marrow of her bones. She

screamed. The sound was sucked into Kikiou's mouth, pressed against hers. The murderous heat disappeared again. She convulsively gasped for air.

"Do you want to die like that? Or this? How about it?"

"Stop—help me—" she implored.

"Then speak. Where is Setsura? Oh, I could pick up his trail, but it does tire me out. Besides, hearing it whispered from the mouth of such an amorous woman is a nice perk. My, my, my. You do have a lovely body. Our little conversation can wait. What do you say we see how my new physique works first?"

Kikiou deftly stripped the garments off the flaming woman. The adjacent shelves and the curtains had already caught fire. Her skin was sparking and smoldering all over. In the midst of this volcanic hell, the woman's white thighs raised up.

The flesh was seared in a flash. Regardless, Kikiou ran his lips across the skin. The woman moaned and writhed. These weren't cries of pain but of satisfaction. Getting ravished under such extreme conditions heightened her senses all the more.

She had the entrancing body of a yakuza woman, nothing diminutive or frail about her. Every time she twisted and ground, her large breasts heaved and swayed. Kikiou pressed his hands against her chest and parted her legs.

"Ah, what a feeling. The sensation of being surrounded by hot flesh. It is wonderful. I am deeply grateful, Doctor Mephisto."

The old man in the long robes laid his body against the body of

the burning woman.

The headquarters of the Mad Men Society was located in a corner of the housing block in Sumiyoshi. The gang had fifty members at this point. Not a big gang, but it hadn't ceded any territory after clashing with bigger opponents. According to Battle Front, the newspaper that covered their trade, that was because "Every last one of them has something off about him."

That was clear from the reception Hamada and Setsura got at headquarters. Of the gang members there, one had hair completely made of wire, another had three eyes in his forehead, and as to the third, blue-white sparks shot out every time he clenched and opened his hands. This was a den of crazies not even "normal" gangbangers wanted to hang around with, to say nothing of "normal" people.

Collecting the most radical and violent from among the population of Shinjuku, the Mad Men Society had come to be known as the "Mutant Yakuza Corps." Their personal histories were all over the map.

"What's with the gigolo?" airily asked the half-faced cyborg. He'd killed the black market doctor who botched his reconstruction surgery.

"Hey, Hamada, you been keeping him all to yourself?" The pale corpse of a man licking his lips was a soldier who'd been possessed in a crematorium, and while the flames were lit, busted out of the incinerator and escaped.

This bunch, who as a general rule didn't express interest in mortal men other than in terms of appetite, stared at Setsura with

entranced eyes.

"What's this? What's this?" From the back of the room came the gang's capo, Kyuzan Jinbo. He was wearing western dress for a change. People around these parts were hardly surprised to see him strutting around buck naked.

As would be expected of the man who could bring together such a band of outcasts and lead them into battle with bigger gangs, he carried himself with a fierce dignity. The sinews on the arms jutting out of his sleeves and the neck sticking out of his collar glinted like steel bands.

He glanced at Setsura. His thick lips parted and he all but gaped at him. "So this is your unusual guest?"

"Well, to tell the truth—" said Hamada.

The subsequent explanation took up a good ten minutes.

"Sounds good to me." Jinbo clapped his hands on his knees, raising a clunking sound like brass balls covered with cloth. "You do right by us and we do right by you. Whatever it is you've got, go ahead and stay here till it gets all better. Just one thing to watch out for. As you can see, leave him in the care of anybody else and even I can't guarantee things won't get a little hairy. Hell, he makes even my heart go pitter-pat."

"Thank you," said Hamada, bowing his head.

"The *qigong* sensei will be here tonight. He can rest in the back until then."

“Okay.” He said solemnly to Setsura, “Let’s go, okay?”

Hamada had started for the door when the *ping* of a guitar string snapping rang out. They all turned curiously toward the source of the sound. One of the younger members—though as bald as a billiard ball—clasped his hand to his left shoulder.

“What happened?” he was asked, though like it was no big deal.

Baldy didn’t answer. After Jinbo and the other two left the main room, he took his hand from his shoulder. The blood impatiently gushed out. Among the eight there, Electric Hands was the only one who visibly reacted, with a “Huh, how about that?” expression. For them, blood was no more remarkable a sight than spilled coffee.

“The lady killer?” asked the guy with lumps squirming beneath his clothing, pushing out and sinking back in.

“Yeah. He’s a nice ’un. I was tossing a little love dust in his direction when it happened.”

“Tossing?” Steel Hair turned around. His hair jangled like wind chimes. “That guy nailed you before you even acted. He saw it coming before you did. In any case, better you than me.”

“You’re telling me. But I’d better get this blood stopped.”

Baldy reached into the pocket of his pants and took out a translucent patch of artificial human skin and applied it to the wound. The engineered cells fused with the natural cells at the molecular level, sterilizing and cauterizing the wound.

The devil wires Setsura’s unconscious cast out sliced a foot

through Baldy's shoulder, almost down to his lungs—surely he must feel the pain.

"I've heard of this gift," said Three Eyes.

"Ah," said Dead Guy, putting two and two together. "Shinjuku's best manhunter. I've heard the rumors. There's a thing or two I've been thinking of having him search for."

"That face and those skills—just my cup of tea."

Lumpy shivered all over. His undulating body swelled up. A viscous wave of emotion—either of wonder or murderous intent—swept through the room.

But the voice from the sofa in the corner quenched it like a dash of cold water.

"*Something's—coming*."

Like an oracle prophesying from the ruins of Delphi. Seized by a state of sudden foreboding, everybody turned.

"*Something evil—this way comes. And will kill—every one of us*."

For a long moment, the room fell into silence. The sound of the rain filtered in. Then somebody said, "Well, that sounds interesting for a change."

Part Eleven: Midsummer Night Massacre

Chapter One

The plump lady arrived at the military hospital attached to the Defense Agency around noon. She had on a finely embroidered reddish-brown hooded blouse and a skirt and was carrying a staff that looked like a gnarled old branch.

The receiving nurse gave the medieval witch getup a long look. And then cooed at the sight of the delightfully cute golden-haired girl holding her left hand.

“Um, what can I do for you?”

Her voice grew gentle as well. Nevertheless, the old fat foreigner rapped on the counter with her cane and said in a gravelly voice, “Mayor Kajiwara. I assume you know him. The man in charge of Demon City Shinjuku. He flew off to the Defense Agency this morning and hasn’t returned. I was told to come here to see him.”

She said all this in a loud, put-out voice, attracting the attention of everybody in the lobby.

“So where is Mayor Kajiwara’s room? C’mon, Missy, or don’t you know?”

The receptionist stared blankly back at her. A blue spark of light reflected in her eyes. By the time it registered in her mind that the fat old lady had caused it, her thoughts had already bent to her will.

“Where, where, where?”

The security guards rushed over, astounded by the sight of the grandmotherly woman pounding on the counter. A few had sonic paralyzers at the ready.

“Lady, what are you doing?”

“Come with us.”

They seized her by the shoulders. Her staff moved in a blur. Only with an old woman’s strength, so it was no surprise that the security guards grabbed their wrists.

The one that hadn’t reached for his tranquilizer gun. “Stubborn old bitch.”

Just then, an ear-splitting sound echoed around the room. The fat lady struck her staff against the floor and said in an angry, shrill voice, “Shut up! And get back to work!”

The security guards gaped, but backing down wasn’t in their job description and they redoubled their efforts. Except that these men, supposedly in a towering rage, instead exchanged confused looks and slunk back to where they’d come from, having forgotten that the old woman was even there in the first place.

“My God, a bunch of weekend warriors think they can take an ordinary citizen for a fool, do they? These lapdogs should content themselves babysitting the muckety-mucks and helping themselves to crumbs from the table. Well, then—”

She stared unabashedly around her. Any of the patients who stared back quickly averted their eyes. The fat lady laughed heartily.

At the sound of the knock, the attending nurse thumbed the remote that operated the monitors. The twenty-one-inch screen displayed the scene just outside the door.

“What in the world?” The surprise in the exclamation was nevertheless gentle. She took her hand from the small semi-automatic on her hip and opened the door. “How may I help you?” she bent over and asked the golden-haired girl.

“Do you have one soul or two?” the girl asked.

“Huh?”

“Do you have one name or two? I understand. Sweet dreams.”

The nurse reached for her handgun. A delicate white hand restrained it, and with a small finger poked her between the eyes. The agent posing as a nurse collapsed. The doll girl supported her easily with her small body and entered the room.

Kajiwara was lying on the bed. The egg sat on the side table. The doll girl deposited the faux nurse on the sofa and approached the bed. Inside the white room, her purple satin dress, flaxen hair and deep blue eyes might arouse in a person’s mind memories of distant, foreign lands.

From the pocket of her dress she took a piece of dried root. Her body rose up, coming to a halt over his chest. His breathing was very even, as if he was floating too. She trailed the root across his mouth.

And then drove it into his left eye so deeply the point must have penetrated the eye socket and stabbed into his brain.

But no blood flowed. His body didn't spasm with pain.

Kajiwara reached his arms and stretched and yawned. He opened his right eye. He recognized the doll girl and said, as if waking up invigorated from a pleasant night's sleep, "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," the doll girl said courteously, though compared to her conversations with Setsura, her tone of voice was understandably a tad more formal.

The mayor closed his eye and searched his memories. With a nonplussed look he glanced at the doll girl and then turned his head, noticing the nurse.

"So I screwed up, it seems. What's the time and date?"

The girl told him and the mayor relaxed a bit. "Good. I couldn't afford to sleep the next two days away. Having seen the egg's dream, the director must have reconsidered."

"No," the girl answered.

He peered dubiously at the small face. Following her gaze, disappointment clouded the mayor's countenance. "The egg is here. If he accepted the meaning of the dream, he would want to destroy it. So the answer must be no."

But his gloomy expression did not last long. He was responsible for the world's most obstreperous child, forever in her terrible twos. He vaulted out of bed with a vigor that nearly sent the doll girl flying. "This will not do. Not in Shinjuku. Time to go home. I'd appreciate your company. So, what's up with that fat old witch called

Tonbeau?”

“She’s downstairs, fending off the security guards. I took advantage of the diversion to sneak up here.” The doll girl alighted nimbly on the ground. She frowned a bit, undoubtedly thinking them an entirely uncivilized lot.

“Tonbeau-sama spied out this hospital and room. When you were at Nuvenberg-sama’s house, she memorized your aura. She knows a way of tying a string, so to speak, to a personal aura.”

“Nice,” he nodded. He got his clothes from the closet and proceeded to dress. It was clearly going in one ear and out the other.

“I am really sorry,” the doll girl said in a cherubic voice.

“Huh?”

“Don’t you want to see out of your left eye?”

He covered his other eye with his hand and looked around. “What the hell? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Of course not. The root of the mandrake to open your eyes. It shouldn’t damage anything, not right away.”

“Could you pull it out, then?”

“You must do it yourself. That is the rule. Otherwise, ordinary blindness won’t be the end of it. Though you should feel no pain.”

It took the mayor ten minutes to get it out. He rolled his completely unharmed eyes, as the doll girl took the root from the surprised man’s hand and left the room ahead of him.

“Good heavens,” she said softly.

A fair number of people were lying in the hallway. They weren’t the security guards, but men in suits, special agents from the Defense Agency. Tonbeau Nuvenberg got up from a chair in the hallway. The receptionist tagged along after her.

Tonbeau glanced up at the camera. She said in a grousing manner, as if not only this hospital but pretty much the entire world was hardly worth her time and effort, “That thing there is recording a perfectly normal hallway.”

“I am impressed.” The doll girl bowed low. “You are truly my mistress’s sister. But who is that?”

“However freely we may move about here, this hospital is an institution of the Defense Agency. Until we are safely somewhere else, I would prefer to avoid tangling with Japan’s Self-Defense Forces. So I decided to make use of her.”

“Is this a life-threatening situation?”

“That depends on them.”

“How unfortunate.”

“You’re telling me.”

“What are you two going on about?” complained Kajiwara. “Let’s get the hell out of here or things will get a lot worse than they already are.”

“Ah, Mr. Mayor, good to see you safe and sound.” Tonbeau smiled knowingly. “How went your conference with the Defense

Agency director?”

“A total failure,” Kajiwara answered bitterly. “Which means we must consider our next steps. We need to get back to Shinjuku as quickly as possible.”

“Back to business, eh?”

“Are you looking for a down payment?”

“Everything costs something. There are business expenses. Living expenses. Hazardous duty pay.”

“So, a bonus?” Kajiwara said, clearly irritated. “How much we talking about?”

“Heh, heh, heh.” She thrust out the five caterpillar-like fingers of her right hand.

“Five grand? Fine.”

“Fifty by my count.”

“I’ll walk home.”

“Nobody’s stopping you.” Tonbeau snickered. “I can lift one finger and reveal to all those prying eyes what’s really going on in this hallway.”

“Damned black witch.” A moment later Kajiwara said, “Agreed. Now let’s get going!”

“You’ll never lose betting on the devil!” The Czech witch gleefully rubbed her hands together.

A rapping sound in the direction of the windows drew their

attention. The doll girl alone smiled. The sharp beak pressed against the glass. A large pair of wings fanned the air. The dark shadow had been, from time immemorial, a harbinger of bad luck, though this one could be said to radiate a vague sense of lovableness.

"What has that birdbrain been doing up to now?" complained Tonbeau, sidling up to the window.

Thanks to the thick glass, the big raven didn't appear perturbed in the least. The doll girl observed the opening and closing of its beak and interpreted. "JDF Special Forces have cordoned off the hospital. My word, it looks like they've got everything from tanks to helicopters on the move."

Kajiwara smiled grimly, clapped his hands together and said without any great signs of distress, "I'll ride that crow out of here. Good plan!"

"You think it can carry a fatso like you? You must be still talking in your sleep."

"Who the hell are you calling fat? You look in a mirror lately, lady? You must have clouded your senses with one of your own spells!"

"Same goes for you, buster!" Fiery sparks lit up the witch's eyes. Then faded. "We can settle this later. For the time being, if you want to get out of here, you will do exactly as I say."

Kajiwara looked out the window, at the hospital's courtyard. Under the pouring rain, the flowers in the flower beds were strangely and enticingly vibrant.

Moments later, the rain had grown an order of magnitude heavier. Kajiwara could easily imagine that a kid who left his toy train or boat out in the rain would find it smashed to bits the next morning. The courtyard was vacant. Needless to say, no tanks or helicopters either.

With a glance at the raven, he came to his decision. “Understood. It’s all in your hands.”

The raven again tapped on the window. “It looks dangerous out here.”

By strange coincidence, the witch then echoed the exact same words spoken several miles across town in a certain yakuza den. “Dangerous? Well, that sounds interesting for a change.”

Chapter Two

As soon as the security cameras spying on the lobby captured images of Tonbeau Nuvenberg and the doll girl, the Defense Agency's special agents in the security office rolled into action.

Just to make sure, the other agents already mingling with the patients, nurses and candystripers were ordered to stand down at first. Instead, the regular security detail would make the first moves. A good way to suss out the strength of the enemy.

After the old woman brushed off the security guards with a slap of her staff, they tracked the doll girl into the VIP suite. The agents went to work.

And then—nothing. They wandered back and forth in front of the hospital room. When they finally restored access to the camera in the room, the doll girl and the mayor had vanished.

It was time to bring in a special ops unit, though the circumstances here were unique. Tanks and armored personnel carriers were mobilized, along with attack helicopters. Except that they had no idea what kind of powers they were up against.

The inmates had escaped from the Demon City Shinjuku asylum, and now the outside world was trying to keep them from getting back in.

They fed the parameters into the Defense Agency's intel ops computer. It spat out a choice—an unattached group within the

Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces. This would be their virgin deployment, and what a "first time" it would be. Their opponents were a fat old lady, a middle-aged man, and a doll.

When they left the lobby, the raven called down from the dark clouds above. To frustrate any listening devices, it didn't use human words. "Three attack helicopters. One medium tank in the trees over there. Special ops forces hiding in the bushes. Hey, you getting all this?"

"Yes," the doll girl replied. Kajiwara couldn't see anything but the rain-shrouded courtyard.

Four years before, the purchase of an adjoining private estate had doubled the size of the hospital grounds. Getting from the lobby to the front gates had become something of a journey. However, there simply weren't a lot of places along the way to hide tanks and soldiers.

Beyond that, the other two seemed to be aware of something he couldn't see, and yet remained utterly unperturbed by it, which only heightened Kajiwara's state of unease.

The rain poured down, enveloping everything in an indefinite haze. For a moment at least, God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

Tonbeau and the doll girl opened umbrellas and stepped off the portico, Kajiwara between them. The umbrellas were courtesy of the hospital. The two had arrived by taxi—which had bolted a long time ago.

“What are we going to do?” the doll girl asked. “We can leave everything above to the raven. And below? Shall we wait for them to make the first move?”

“No,” said Tonbeau.

She flicked her staff, scattering pebbles and grains of sand into the thick green foliage. That was certainly all it appeared to be. As soon as the human figures rose up, the branches and leaves attached to their uniforms scattered and they fell to the ground.

“Three,” said Tonbeau, tilting the umbrella forward and to the right and spinning it like a propeller, with no more effort or vigor than any old lady. But as the full metal jacket rounds streaked in at an ultrasonic eight thousand feet per second, the umbrella flicked them all away, making the dirt and stones dance on the ground around them.

“What was that?” Kajiwara asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Tonbeau said sweetly, returning the umbrella to its normal position.

Again the umbrella spun. Shooters stepped out from among the buildings holding sniper rifles, clutching their chests and abdomens, and falling to the ground.

“Their camouflage leaves much to be desired,” Tonbeau sneered.

Though had any other professional soldier—especially one not beholden to the SDF—witnessed the goings-on here, he would have come away with the opposite impression.

The operatives from a short while ago had been disguised with twigs and branches. The ones on the ground now had skin and uniforms dabbed with paint the same color as the walls—that alone had made them vanish completely from Kajiwara's field of vision. They were absorbed into the undergrowth and faded into the walls. Color and dimensionality posed no obstacle.

Research into the workings of the human eye, the properties of reflected light, and spectrum analysis had perfected these camouflage techniques. Under a brilliant noonday sun, a soldier simply finding cover in a grove of trees or even in sandy soil vanished out of sight. Needless to say, a search and destroy crew could employ these stealth technologies to devastating effect.

"Watch out!" called out the doll girl.

She leapt six feet into the air, swinging her right hand down like a sword. A splotch like India ink erupted in the air. Beneath it the vague outlines of a man rose up. Pushing the tottering form out of the way, the wavering shadow behind it raised an indistinct hand.

Silver light streaked at Kajiwara's forehead. A black splotch intercepted it. The doll girl had opened the other umbrella, spinning it the same way Tonbeau had deflected the blade. The invisible soldier was thrown to the ground like a wet garment whipped out of a broken washing machine.

"Two and another two—that adds up to seven," Tonbeau Nuvenberg said, as if bored by the whole exercise. "That takes cares of the humans. Now the machines. What a bother."

"Are you sure?" said the doll girl, alighting on the ground.

She didn't say either way. Nothing more occurred as the three approached within two dozen yards of the gate.

"So they're not going to try anything else?" Kajiwara sighed in relief.

"Don't start celebrating anytime soon," Tonbeau snapped.

"Eh?"

"Where's it at?"

The doll girl answered, "Down and to the right."

Kajiwara turned in that direction. Another building rose up thirty feet away. The ground climbed a thirty degree slope toward it. If it kept on going, it would have connected with a walkway on the second floor. The road, fifteen or so feet wide, was lined with flowers.

The tank crouched like a hidden tiger at the foot of the slope, and no less ferocious. Except that however he peeled his eyes and craned his ears, Kajiwara could detect no sight or sound of it through the gray fog and rain.

The other two joined him, and they stepped forward. Two steps—and he heard it. The engine. The muffler was engineered so precisely the noise was barely audible above the downpour.

Kajiwara faced the road. A gun barrel slowly protruded. The rain raised a white mist on the curved steel surface. The body of the vehicle didn't appear. But there was a tank in the courtyard.

The barrel quickly swung around to draw aim on them. And

struck the rising slope.

Kajiwara couldn't have imagined what happened next. And not just him. Any veteran soldier or engineer would think he was dreaming.

As soon as the barrel touched the slope, the rest of the big tank rose up, using that contact point as a fulcrum. It didn't simply elevate. As the barrel turned, the body of the tank traced an arc through the air. Rather like a gymnast doing a dismount from the high bar.

Flashing its undersides—like the bottom of a Japanese geta shoe—it pivoted and slammed down on the road, shaking the earth and making the road creak like a rusty hinge.

"Un-fucking-believable," Kajiwara muttered.

No one before then would have considered a battle tank using its own gun barrel to vault itself through the air. But this was no dream. And the hard evidence was crouching in front of them on the road like the king of the jungle. The barrel released its hold a split-second before landing and drew aim on the three, the hydraulic suspension and roll stabilizers humming as it moved forward on its caterpillar tracks.

An impressive moving fortress. Thirty feet long, a dozen feet wide, and equipped with an 1100 horsepower gas turbine engine, the fifty-ton "Model 90" was the SDF's top-of-the-line, medium-weight battle tank.

As they stood rooted to the spot, the iron monster came to a halt

fifteen feet in front of them. Kajiwara watched as the black hole moved towards them, as if opening its black maw—the tank's 5.2 meters by 120 mm smooth bore cannon.

Matching what it could do in the air, the dexterity of its landing on the sloping road magnified its imposing presence all the more. The massive steel fortress dominating the field of view stole away the desire to fight along with the will to resist.

A single one of the tank's high explosive squash head (HESH), or high explosive anti-tank (HEAT), or armor-piercing (AP) rounds would reduce the three of them to pieces too small to bother picking up.

"When a tank can dance like a ballerina, well, the world has certainly changed." Tonbeau Nuvenberg spoke not in fear but amazement.

"Will it shoot inside the grounds of a hospital with so many witnesses?" the doll girl wondered.

"Look, we've got a bloody VIP with us, one they can't let go. As for the patients, for all we know they could all be drugged to the gills."

"True."

"Seems that the outside world is aping Demon City now. How amusing. More proof that human nature never changes. People are as people do."

Kajiwara's brow was as wet with sweat as from the rain. "Are we going to do something or just stand around talking?"

“Hoh. You think we *can* do something? I like your pluck.” Tonbeau grinned.

A voice through a bullhorn ordered them, “Return to the hospital! You won’t get a second warning. Before the count of three, turn around and start walking! One!”

“Now what?” Kajiwara asked in a strained voice.

“Be quiet.”

“Two!”

“Let’s go.”

“Yes.”

“Three.”

A sharp report struck the gun barrel, a blow from Tonbeau Nuvenberg’s staff. What happened next should have been more surprising than it was. With a groan, the tank spun around the point of contact. The wind beat in their faces. After a complete revolution, the staff let go like a baton and the fifty-ton vehicle flew through the air as easily as a piece of paper-mâché.

It fell back to the ground with a small earthquake, and a rumbling roar a few seconds later.

“Well, that takes care of that,” Tonbeau Nuvenberg said frostily.

Kajiwara’s mouth was still hanging open. He asked in a squeaky voice, “How did you do that?”

“I simply reversed the tank’s own angular momentum. I can’t lift

a whole lump of iron like that by myself, but redirecting a vector of force that already exists is child's play for a witch. Okay, I didn't borrow a bit of energy from the ground."

"Tonbeau-sama—the helicopters," said the doll girl, looking up at the dark, empty sky.

"That stupid crow screwed up."

Her censorious eyes stared into the heavens and caught sight of a rapidly descending raptor—that became an aircraft as it approached. The helicopter maintained the same trajectory as it came nearer, stopping in a hovering mode thirty feet above them. The downdraft gusted against the doll girl's golden hair and the hood of Tonbeau's blouse. The unyielding Kajiwara held his hand up to his face.

"Go back!" shouted a uniformed man, leaning out of the helicopter.

The six barrels of the 20 mm Vulcan cannon slung to the helicopter's undercarriage—far more intimidating than the 120 mm smooth bore tank weapon—pointed at the three.

"Budge that staff and we shoot. Do as you are ordered and stand down!"

"Oh, for God's sakes," Tonbeau sighed. "It's come to this, has it?"

"I would consider the timing rather fortuitous," the doll girl softly answered. The blast of wind seemed to bend the doll's face into a human grimace.

“Indeed. They seemed to have sized up my abilities as well. I need to keep in mind what modern weaponry involves.”

The bodies of the three began to fade and run, like a watercolor painting dissolving in the rain.

“Fire!” a man’s voice resounded.

The 20 mm depleted uranium rounds—that could turn heavy tank armor into Swiss cheese—rained down at four thousand rounds a second, filling the fragments of their silhouettes with fire and turning the thick asphalt into rubble.

Several seconds later came the cry, “Cease fire! There’s nobody there!”

Like a hallucination that was there and gone. In the pouring rain the trees and walls and buildings melted into the black and gray world. Only the people were gone.

“Fucking Demon City Shinjuku.” Now the man in the helicopter understood what it meant to be a citizen of that city.

While the three of them were messing it up with the special ops forces, several eyewitnesses observed a woman in a white nurse’s uniform slipping out the back gate of the hospital. She hailed a taxi and set off in the direction of Shinjuku.

One of the passersby happened to glance through the car window and saw that the nurse was accompanied by a man and two women. The taxi driver appeared to take no note of it himself, and drove away.

Chapter Three

When the rain let up and the sun shone down, the most surprising thing that day in Shinjuku was the wild outbreak of trees and shrubs on the city streets.

Around dawn, a fat lady and a golden-haired girl had been seen sowing what looked like seeds. And together with the cawing of a crow, the sight of sand-like grains falling from the sky.

Those who contacted the ward offices were told that the plants were dangerous and not to touch them. Otherwise, the city government did nothing.

People cast baleful looks at the conspicuously shuttered homes and businesses, and reached into their pockets to fondle the peaches they'd purchased at grocery stores and supermarkets, more precious to them than priceless gems.

Signs of life on the roads and thoroughfares had diminished since the day before. And remembering that the same had been true the day before that, people stopped and shivered under the warm summer rain.

The night still came.

The dim shadows from the new trees falling on the roads grew shorter and reached in the opposite direction. The rain splashed on the shadows, the cars, coaches, trucks, and armored vehicles rolled over them; shoes, geta, and sneakers tread on them.

“The sun has set,” said Steel Hair, looking out from the doorway.

He wasn’t saying anything they didn’t already know. The ceiling lights in gang headquarters had automatically come on a few minutes before. Though nobody had bothered commenting on the fact.

“Seems earlier than usual,” said Electric Hands, playing with the blue-white fire.

“There’re gonna be days like that in this city.” Dead Guy took a swig of whisky from a bottle and turned his pallid face toward the rear door. “Taking a peek?” he inquired of no one in particular.

“Yeah.” Three Eyes nodded. The third eye in the middle of his forehead glimmered hauntingly with the colors of the rainbow. “Hamada is sticking by his bedside. I guess he figures if push comes to shove, they’ll go down together in a blaze of glory.”

“How honorable of him. Really must be smitten.”

“Shit!” wailed Cyborg Man. He rapped the silver half of his face.

Something resembling the lovey-doveys—rather unbecoming that this bunch should harbor such delusions—swirled about the room.

Baldy looked at the sofa. “Hey, we haven’t heard from you since noon. What’s with these new guests we’re expecting? What about the four we dealt with earlier?”

“*Not—them—*” came the thin voice, almost drowned out by the sound of the rain. The speaker was a blackish blob no larger than a child. All the more surprising, without looking too hard, that on that lump could be perceived a human face and a pair of eyes.

A white mouth opened on the dark face. "*They were—human. These—are not*."

"Something more than human, eh?" Lumpy smiled. "That makes them the same as us."

"*No*," the Blob answered in a terrified voice. "*No. We are—human. Mutant humans. But not—them*."

"How close?" asked Steel Hair.

"*I don't—know. But they will be here—soon. And everybody—dies*."

Blue-white light flashed between Electric Hands' palms and arced between him and the Blob, raising sparks and smoke and screams. "Wake the fuck up, big mouth!"

But he was the only one shouting. "Leave him alone. If he says it, it's gonna happen. That's the way it's always been. If you don't like it, then you'd better start running." Baldy indicated the door with his chin.

Electric Hands fell silent. Nobody moved. In their hearts flickered a dim white silhouette, bathed in light. When it came to kin and kind, these rough men had as much in common with him as the moon and the baying hounds. But it was to them like the smile of an angel.

Whatever cause suffused that countenance, they would take as their own. What they had witnessed was a pure visage devoid of all sentiment.

No sooner had their eyes beheld him than emotions they had never felt before welled up in their hearts. *They must protect*. They all felt that conviction in their souls, like what the parent feels toward the child, what the lover feels toward the beloved, the strong toward the weak.

Though they didn't quite comprehend it themselves. But they accepted it as if it had been bred in the bone all along. And so they waited for what came stealing through the gloom of the night.

"*They're coming*," said the Blob behind them.

Nobody turned to look. They all felt it. The rain poured down like torrents of mud. The psychological currents flowed just as hard. Steel Hair got to his feet chomping at the bit.

"I can't fucking stand it!" Cyborg groaned.

"Maybe it's about time I died." Dead Guy—who'd escaped the incinerator once already—set down the whiskey bottle and stood up.

"*Now—almost fifty yards away—in front of Nogi's bar—four of them*."

"I'll check it out," said Steel Hair.

Cyborg put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm the strongest one here. Let me see what they've got first."

A four-man hit squad from another gang had raided the place just after noon. That he'd torn off the heads of three of them was fresh on everybody's mind. The arm on the roboticized left side of his body could punch through ballistic armor like cardboard.

“Yeah, it’s in your hands,” Three Eyes said with a wry smile. “If you live, the young prince may well be yours. A little motivation to bring you home. Otherwise, it shouldn’t last long.”

Cyborg flashed a thin smile in return and left through the front door. The splashes disappeared into the distance. His shadow flickered beneath a street light, and then the darkness swallowed him up.

“Good luck with that,” Three Eyes muttered to himself. He looked at Steel Hair.

“That leaves seven of us,” said Steel Hair. “Plus Hamada. The rest of you split. Sticking around definitely won’t do you any good.”

Everybody nodded in unison.

“I’ll let him know,” said Baldy, heading to the room in the back.

Steel Hair nodded at the sofa. “Take him with you. Maybe he’ll see something useful. And stay there. We’ve got the place covered. No need to come back.”

Baldy cradled the Blob in his arms and left. The walking dead man continued, “You and you, keep a watch on the perimeter. We’ll hold them there as best we can, but I’m not holding onto high hopes.”

Lumpy and Electric Hands nodded and turned around.

“It’s you and me here. Sorry.”

Three Eyes smiled at Steel Hair’s apology. “Hell, we never have gotten along. So, what’s your flavor?”

“Shotgun.”

“Sword for me.”

Three Eyes reached behind the sofa and retrieved a Benelli M93 semi-automatic shotgun and a plain Japanese *shirazaya* samurai sword. *Shirazaya* swords didn’t have a hilt guard, and became a single arc of polished wood when fitted with a matching scabbard.

He tossed the Benelli to Steel Hair, drew out the sword and cast aside the scabbard. As he examined the exposed steel, his eyes filled with the eerie glow.

Meanwhile, Steel Hair leaned the Benelli against a chair, sat down, and seized a clump of hair. A *clattering* sound as he tore it out. Blood spattered onto his face. He ignored it, and did it three more times, depositing the results on the table in front of him.

He wiped away the blood covering his face, grabbed several clumps from the pile with both hands and twisted the strands of hair into curious shapes—each strand as sharp as a needle, that if hurled at a victim would easily pierce the flesh. Making what looked like a beetle with its legs splayed out, he set it aside with a sense of satisfaction.

In less than two minutes, he had fashioned every strand of hair into steel bugs that consisted only of legs. He got up and cast them on the floor, against the walls and ceiling. He clapped his hands together and turned to Three Eyes.

The “beetles” he’d thrown against the walls and ceiling didn’t pierce the surface, but clung to it like the real things.

Three Eyes finished what he was doing. The middle of the blade glowed. “Just in time,” he said.

“They’re coming.” Steel Hair licked the blood dripping past his mouth.

The wellspring of that eerie, unearthly vibe drew bewitchingly near. The meaning was clear—Cyborg had failed.

Steel Hair raised the Benelli to his shoulder. Each twelve gauge shell could perforate a target with nine double-ought buckshot pellets. Every time he bought ammo, the clerk would inevitably ask, “You looking to knock down walls with those?”

An indication of how powerful they were.

A *whoosh* of air as Three Eyes swung the samurai sword. A moment of silence. He noticed—the enemy was at the door. The sound of the rain. The door opened with great force. Hard enough to smash against the wall and send fissures shooting through the wallboard.

Before the two could react, a twisted body was tossed at their feet. Cyborg’s corpse. He was split in half. From the nature of the wounds, he’d been torn apart. The stench of blood filled the room. When they looked up from the body, the enemy was standing inside the room. Their eyes narrowed.

Her skin as pale as a termite’s—the enemy was a woman. Five eyes focused on the nape of her willowy neck.

“But, of course. A vampire.”

“The bite marks are still there, so she’s still half-and-half. Girl, you came to the wrong damn place to party. You ain’t leaving here alive or undead.”

The bodies of the two yakuzas swelled with the flames of malice. More than any hostility toward vampires, here was the expression of the twisted and muddied emotions they held for this pretty girl who deigned to chase after that young man.

They couldn’t allow him to end up looking like her pasty white self. They couldn’t allow her to add him to their number. They wouldn’t hand him over to anybody.

“Die, bitch!” Three Eyes roared.

He leapt forward, sweeping the sword sideways with all his strength. The girl shifted her stance a split-second before the polished steel could cleave her slender neck in two. The sword sliced diagonally and down across her chest from her left shoulder.

She jumped up, grabbing the blade and deflecting it. The blood didn’t pour out. Thin red streams spilled through the slit in the shroud. She staggered. As a vampire, she couldn’t die, but a human she could be harmed.

“Get back!”

Screams turned to thunder. Nine double-ought shotgun pellets hit her between her breasts. The shroud spouted fire. The impact knocked her against the window. She barely managed to regain her footing.

“That’s not enough to kill her!” Three Eyes shouted. He cocked

back the sword. “Leave this to me. It’s gotta be through the heart.”

He ran at her. This time he wouldn’t slip up. He understood the nature of her inhuman strength from the last time she touched the blade.

She became a blur.

Shit, he thought. The sword passed through the borders of the shroud. His miscalculation threw him off balance and he pitched forward as a white hand clamped around his neck.

A gargling, wheezing sound as she crushed his throat. The shotgun barked twice. The rounds gnawed into her torso. The shock slammed her away from Three Eyes. This time the shroud was painted with a bright splotch of blood.

“Finish her off!” Steel Hair yelled.

Hacking up blood, Three Eyes hauled himself to his feet, using the sword to support his weight. Bracing his legs, he drew back the sword in order to deliver the killing blow.

The girl didn’t retreat. The tip of the sword pierced the white flesh of her breast. And stopped. A burly fist curled around the blade. That was when Three Eyes noticed the man standing next to her.

The big, imposing man wore a glittering brocaded tunic. His eyes cast off a fierce red glow. The light welled up from his eyes and dripped from his iron jaw onto his chest.

The man was weeping. “My wife threw herself from the parapets

of Poenari Castle." His voice resounded like a banshee's howl. Three Eyes and Steel Hair froze in their tracks. "You cannot die. Blasted by bullets, cut by the sword—ah, the pain and the suffering. You should become as I am. Alas, as I am now, I cannot die. The bitterness, Princess. The bitter dregs, Doctor. Fortunately, these fools are not Setsura. So I will snuff out their candles."

The tall silhouette—General Bey—twisted his right hand. The sword broke neatly in two. His support kicked out from under him, Three Eyes reeled backwards. Next to him lines of fire streaked out.

The repeated impacts shook the general's upper body and blew away his face. Paying the gruesome wounds no mind, the general turned to the girl—Takako—and dug his finger into the breast of the shroud. Twisting and extracting it, he pinched between his thumb and forefinger a shotgun pellet. It fell to the floor with a metallic *clack*.

The sound repeated itself nine times. Every time he extracted one, Takako's body trembled. Her lingering humanity could still feel the sensations. The general looked at her face, quivering with pain. The eyes of one reflected the face of the other. But their emotions were like heaven and earth.

Endless memories wavered in the eyes of the vampire lord. In Takako's shone the empty, unrecognized reflection of his face.

"Now I am with you," Kazikli Bey whispered. "How many times I have prayed for our reunion, but could do nothing. I could not prevent you from leaping to your death. At the very least, I will dispose of any obstacles preventing you from destroying Setsura."

He slowly turned around as the broken sword buried itself into his neck with a *thud*. His swarthy hand enveloped the face of Three Eyes.

"That sword of mine takes its time getting the job done. So the young man, his name is Setsura—?"

Before the last word left his mouth, the general closed his hand to a fist, crushing the head of Three Eyes to a bloody pulp. The gray matter squirted between his fingers. He thrust the body out of the way. He stepped toward his remaining foe. And then stopped mid-stride.

The general looked down at his feet, then circled his hands around the back of his head. His whole body went rigid. The body-less beetles swarmed over his legs, and like little jackhammers burrowed down to the bone. They sprang from the ceiling and walls onto his back and neck and the crown of his head and sank in their needle-sharp limbs.

"That's my hair. Made from beryllium steel. It'll cut you down to the marrow. I'll send them after the woman next."

Dark blood splattered across the confident countenance like black ink as the general plucked the beetles off his head and hurled them like stones, killing Steel Hair instantly. Not sparing him a second look, the general marched toward the back of the room. Takako Kanan tottered after him like a wandering ghost.

Through the door and up a step was a connecting corridor. The rain-drenched garden was visible through the glass doors on the right and left. The hallway led to the main wing of the house.

“You’d better stop right there!” came the command when they’d made it halfway down the hall.

General Bey turned his head to the left and right. He was being hailed from two directions. In the garden on the right was a man standing in the rain clenching both hands. On the left, his back against a stone lantern, the man’s body crawled with bulges and protuberances.

“You killed those two?” called out the one on the right, his voice rising above the pouring rain. “Good show. But you’ll never pull that blade out of your neck. And the way you’re walking, those metal bugs must be making themselves at home, doing a job on your insides as well. It’s too bad about the woman, but I’ll be sending both of you to the next world. Bring it on.”

The general hesitated. It was true that, try with all his might, he couldn’t extract the blade from his neck. Moreover, while a few fractions of an inch had showed after the initial impact, it was now completed buried in the flesh.

This was a martial technique Kazikli Bey didn’t fully understand. Add to that the steel beetles crawling in his body, shredding his internal organs and breaking his bones. No matter how impressive this vampire’s powers of regeneration, that he was still standing was remarkable enough.

“Wait here,” he said to Takako, pivoting toward the right. Behind him, Takako quivered, making the general look back.

Electric Hands hit him with a blue shock of light. In biological terms, his internal organs resembled those of an electric eel, able to

both generate and store electrical energy. According to the history books, humans with such capabilities were said to exist, but they were exceedingly rare. And this one could not only charge himself up like a capacitor, but could amp up the voltage as well.

And do it in a heavy, soaking rain.

A million volts of electricity burned through General Bey, literally down to his bones. The sword was still stuck in his neck, the metal bugs were inside his body, arcing and sparking. General Bey's eyes rolled back in his head.

The world was wrapped in blue coronal fire.

A mocking voice arose from the garden opposite. Lying under Lumpy on the grass, pale hands and thighs resisted in a voluptuous struggle. Takako's breasts and nipples pressed against the clinging, rain-wet shroud, a far more erotic combination than plain nudity.

In the garden they twined together in a downpour. Takako was more vampire than human, and that alone made it impossible for Lumpy to subdue her by himself. "Hey, could use some help over here! She's a handful!"

From the fierceness of the electrical light, he was confident victory was in their grasp.

General Bey stood there ramrod straight, the whites of his eyes showing. With a contemptuous backwards glance, Electric Hands cleared the hallway with a single jump. He grabbed the white legs kicking in the air. A tingling sensation shot down his spine.

"Interesting. I've always wanted to do one of those Toyama

bitches.”

Lumpy grabbed the neck of the shroud and tore it open. The rain ran down Takako’s exposed breasts.

But no sooner had Electric Hands seized her thighs than his body bent backwards like a spring. Lumpy looked back over his shoulder in amazement as his body was wrapped in the shimmering blue-white bands of electricity.

Part Twelve: Night of the Generals

Chapter One

"Son of a *bitch*!" Electric Hands screamed. Spitting fire and black smoke, wrapped in blue light, he pitched over.

Lumpy bounded backwards, cackling with laughter. He didn't say it as much as his whole body literally shook with mirth. "Good one, buster. Now it's my turn. But first, I'll show you something neat."

General Bey stood like a statue of a war hero in the garden across from the corridor, the pounding rain outlining his body with a fine mist. The second life the Demon Princess had bestowed upon him allowed him to withstand a million-volt charge. But the victory took a terrible toll.

The general's hair stood on end. His charred skin tore away, exposing the pink flesh and muscle beneath. The gold and silver-embroidered tunic was rent and torn and licked with flames. Wearing it alone would surely have burned any human being to death.

But there he stood, his eyes shining like white-hot coals. He had, as was his gift, delivered to the wielder of electromagnetic power a dose of his own medicine.

"Look at this!"

Lumpy took hold of his shirt and ripped it open. The lights of the building shone from behind him, casting his chest into shadow. But General Bey could see—the swarms of squirming human faces.

They cackled in unison, gnashing their yellow teeth and

laughing. His chest and stomach and hands and no doubt his legs—his entire body was covered in fist-sized faces.

Despite himself, even the great General Bey was caught staring for a second. And in that second, blue-black lines leapt out, cutting through the penumbra of light. As the general covered his face, one line bounced off his palm, while the other four or five splashed off his chest and abdomen.

White smoke puffed out. The lines were streams of caustic acid. They ate through clothing and skin, exposing the bones of his hand. But the mouths that spit out this poison chattered in surprise. In a twinkling, the inflamed skin had glistened and healed over with normal scar tissue.

"I didn't think that would do the job alone, but how about this?"

The streams sprang toward the general's feet. They were a different color. As the rain beat down, a round puddle formed on the grass about eighteen inches in diameter. The streams mixed together and turned transparent.

Lumpy pursed his lips and spurted out a crimson liquid. As soon as it touched the puddle, a multicolored cloud rose up.

The general grabbed his throat. His mouth opened wide. He gasped for air. The strangled wheezes sounded like a drowning elephant. The kaleidoscopic smoke stole away the oxygen. He fell to his knees and collapsed forward. The rain pattered on his back.

"You're one nasty motherfucker, but that's all she wrote. Nicely done, if I do say so myself."

Lumpy stroked the cackling lumps with his left hand, and reached with his right to pull a dagger out of his belt. He gazed at the keen blade. “I don’t know if this will do the job, so I guess I’ll have to try it and see.”

He positioned himself on the general’s right side and raised the dagger over his head with both hands, aiming for the base of his neck. He started to swing down—and his hands suddenly stopped.

A liquidy, squishy *thud*, like a stone thrown into a bucket of mud.

He gagged, heaved, screamed. Followed by a chorus of shrieks that were soon erased by the sound of the rain. The last thing Lumpy saw was General Bey’s right arm buried inside his abdomen all the way up to the elbow.

The lumps followed the body in death. The general smashed a couple of them like bubble wrap, and got unsteadily to his feet. He tossed Lumpy aside, and with ragged breaths went over to where Takako was lying in the grass.

“Are you all right?” he asked, though common sense dictated that the question should be directed to him. He’d had steel embedded in his body, high-tension electricity had scorched him down to the marrow, his flesh had been melted, and finally he was asphyxiated—little wonder if he should tread the grass with less than steady steps.

And yet he threw out his chest and drew a thin line across his mouth with his lips, evincing not the slightest sign of weakness. This five-hundred-year-old general could carry himself in no other way.

Still lying down, Takako nodded. As to what she might be thinking, her empty eyes reflected only the dark canopy of the night. She made no effort to move in General Bey's direction.

"We are almost there, that bastard Setsura's bedroom." The general reached down and Takako grasped his hand. "I do not know what is waiting for us ahead. Whether Setsura can be killed. And if he can be, what Princess will do. I do not think she will blithely cast us aside. Our fates are never kind to us. But for now, my dreams have been fulfilled. Do you understand?"

His burned and ravaged face regenerated as he spoke. He gestured at the fallen yakuzas with his left hand. "They have taught me much. I could live in a city filled with them. This city would accept us. Would accept me. And me and you together."

The pouring rain did not dampen these words of love in the least.

"You kill Setsura. I will assist. Kill him no matter what happens. And you and I will live together in this city. Oh, what am I saying? Am I telling you to live? What a thing to say. Needless to say, we do not live so much as we feign at being alive. And not you alone, but the two of us. No one shall stand in our way. Not Princess, not Kikiou." He pulled her to her feet. "Once more into the breach. The enemy lies there."

Baldy cracked open the screen door and poked his head out. "They're coming."

"So they've already killed five?" came a pensive voice from the center of the twenty-by-twenty foot room. It was covered with tatami mats in the traditional style.

A luxurious futon covered the brand-new tatami mats. One shadow sat by itself at the foot of the futon. Two more were seated next to it at the head. One of the two was Kyuzan Jinbo, the capo of the Mad Men Society. He'd posed the question.

"In that case, there's no guarantee the five of us in here can defend our guest. Hey, Hamada. Take him and get out of here."

"That's crazy!" one of the shadows beside the futon shrilly replied. "I couldn't live with myself. Send me in first."

"There's nobody else I can trust him to." Kyuzan nodded to the two behind him. "These two chucked any thoughts for their own safety from the start, transfixed by the sight of his face. Who the hell knows what would happen if I left you alone with him? Are you fine with anything kinky happening to our friend here?"

"Then you come too, Boss."

"Don't be an idiot!" he thundered. "I got less willpower than the rest of you!"

Not only Hamada, but Baldy and Dead Guy glared hard at him, fuming with murderous intent. At the same time, a deadly—and deadly funny—atmosphere filled the room.

"Get your ass in gear. If you don't, I will."

"I get it, I get it. Well, then—"

He leaned over and put his arms around Setsura and hoisted him up. Setsura still had his coat on. Nobody there felt worthy enough to take it off him. Which was leveling no criticism at them.

“I’m so sorry about carrying you on my back. Please persevere.” Hamada was back to talking in a distinctly feminine voice. He picked up the grocery bag next to the futon. He fixed Kyuzan with a look and said, “I’ll contact you later.”

“Sure.”

“Take care.”

With a mixture of camaraderie and jealousy, Hamada bowed low and said, “Forgive me, *anniki*!” Then the pounding patter of feet as he ran out of the room.

“Well, shall we?” Baldy slapped himself on the head and got to his feet. He held a samurai sword in his left hand.

“Boss, this okay with you? Here?”

“Go ahead. Do it.”

“Done.”

Staring at the ceiling, Baldy rose onto the balls of his feet and jumped off the tatami—not hard, and yet he rose a yard into the air. With a rousing shout, white light gushed from the scabbard in all directions. He landed just as lightly, and with a faint *whishing* sound sheathed the sword once again in the scabbard.

No one bested Baldy at the *iai*, the martial art of drawing a sword, cutting down the opponent, and sheathing it afterwards. And this wasn’t a matter of exacting a single death with a single draw. One against five, one against ten, and his scabbard would produce the number of blades needed for the task, dispatching his opponents

in the blink of an eye.

Settling to one knee, the white light flashed around him again. He returned the scabbard to his waist and bowed politely. “Sorry for all the commotion.”

At some point, Jinbo had moved in front of the alcove. Needless to say, he’d seen it all before. In the alcove was an odd object for a room like this—a pachinko machine. Not one of the modern, computer-controlled consoles, but an old-school model, where hand-activated levers shot the steel balls through their courses.

In front of it were several green plastic boxes piled high with the shiny, silver balls. This was the way Kyuzan Jinbo, capo of the Mad Men Society and the most feared yakuza in Demon City Shinjuku, liked to entertain himself.

But he wasn’t about to launch into a game here and now. Nor would he be flicking them out like marbles. He did something even stranger. He picked up one of the plastic boxes and opened his mouth wide. The pea-sized ball bearings poured into his big maw, clinking and rattling.

One heaping box held over seven hundred pachinko balls. He swallowed them all without taking a breath. And moved to the next box. His stomach steadily swelled.

The man was clearly mad. Except that the yakuza capo and his crew performed these actions like holy men conducting solemn rituals.

Jinbo digested the contents of ten boxes in total. With a burp, he

set down the last one and turned to face the door.

Two silhouettes were standing there. “Where is Setsura?” the big one asked. A chunk of sword stuck out of his neck.

“Sorry, there’s nobody home. The only thing you’ll find here is your grave.”

Baldy glided forward, leaving his left foot planted behind him. His right hand released from his left, a colorless, odorless bloodlust radiating not just from the grip but from his whole body. The killing stance of the *iai*—and only an idiot would sally forth to fight after seeing it.

The big shadow in the doorway moved forward.

“*Yaaah—!*” With a glass-shattering martial scream, the spirit and power bundled in the white light struck at the foreign soldier’s brow, sweeping at him so fast that to the human eye he might as well be standing still.

But neither the severer nor the severed were ordinary humans.

The sword split General Bey’s cranium and bisected his spine down to his hipbone and exited at his groin.

Something surely no human could withstand.

A red line ran vertically down the center of his body and burst forth in a fountain. The big man fell over. The tatami shook from the impact.

The other three men watched the intruder’s frame split like a stick of kindling. Even with his regenerative powers, how could he

recover from such a wound? There was no way.

The gore sprayed across sliding doors and screens and stained the sweat on Baldy's forehead as he extracted the blade.

"Good job," Jinbo beamed. He was by now twice his normal size.

A white ghost approached the corpse, like a beautiful sculpture out of a wax museum. She put her hands on the severed torso and pressed the two halves together. The red dividing line shimmered, grew transparent like gelatin, and disappeared.

Baldy would have no mercy on her either. He aimed at Takako's head, drawing and attacking simultaneously, with a terrifying speed that yielded nothing to General Bey's.

Blood burst from her white neck. Baldy bore down with all his weight. He should have instantly decapitated her. What fell instead was the sword from his hands.

Baldy looked down and saw a hand in his side. The left hand of the man he'd sliced in two. The hand tore through the front of him. The thick dagger of the hand transformed into the tip of a sword that could puncture steel and ripped through his stomach.

General Bey stood up. Baldy fell down. The sword grip *thumped* onto the tatami.

The world twisted and warped around them. Black fissures ran to all four corners of the ceiling. The whole structure fell down on the heads of the general and Takako. Baldy's sword had sliced through to the beams holding up the roof.

The cloud of debris swallowed up the two, along with Baldy. The building was a one-story house. The rain beat down the rising cloud, reducing it to a mountain of shattered pillars, lumber and plaster.

A figure slowly approached the wreckage—a pale, skeletal frame—the man resurrected from the incinerator of a crematorium. He wasn't carrying any weapons.

"I'm not dead yet!" he called out to the rubble. "Come on down!"

A chunk of plaster rolled up to his feet. Dead Guy smiled. The rubble stirred. Plywood and beams flew up, scattering the settling dust and stucco. The rain pelted the looming white shadow. In a flash, General Bey resumed his normal shape and form. He reached down to Takako lying in front of him.

Just as the roof caved in, he'd thrown Takako to the floor and rolled on top of her, shielding her against the collapsing building.

"C'mon. That's it. Let's not dawdle." The living Dead Guy clapped his hands. "One way or another, somebody's finally going to die tonight. It's been a long time coming, living while dead. Five years."

What he did next was no less incomprehensible. He ran up to the general and bit down on his neck.

The general's mouth popped open in surprise. Dead Guy had fangs like a wild animal. No sooner had he sunk them halfway into the general's neck than Dead Guy's body burst into flames.

On this wet, warm summer evening, the waves of heat raced through the remains of the room and beat against their faces. Inside a

fire that scalded his flesh and melted his bones, General Bey breathed in the nostalgic scent. The smell of the grave. The fire of the crematorium.

Rain poured down on the burning bodies, sending columns of steam skyward. The incandescent flare gradually faded. After the white smoke wafted away, the charred remains of the two decorated the scorched tatami.

Jinbo Kyuzan watched the last of his underlings literally go up in smoke. He glanced from the general to where Takako Kanan was lying. “Some fireworks, eh sister?” he said softly.

Chapter Two

By the time he'd reached the main road, Hamada wasn't sure he'd make it. He expected to hear the footsteps of the invader behind him any minute now, the invader who'd already consigned some of his colleagues to oblivion as they bought him a little time.

Without slowing, he cast his senses around him. No one—nothing—was there. The back streets were still, as if every living creature, fearing the rain, hid away in their houses and stifled their breaths. Or perhaps at some point they'd dissolved away.

He was completely removed from the world, Hamada realized with a profound sense of loneliness. He wanted to cast aside everything and everyone and run away. The only thing that kept him from wailing aloud in anguish was the young man on his back.

Hamada didn't understand the workings of his own mind. Thus far in his life, no matter how beautiful the man or woman, he'd only seen them in terms of profit and desire. He'd whisper sweet nothings in their ears while stabbing a knife in their chests.

And now Hamada thought—in a moment of pure honesty—that even at the risk of his own life, he would run away with Setsura as long and as far as his legs would take him. In that sense, Setsura's current condition gave him reason to hope, not despair.

He kept a strong hold on the grocery bag. "What Aki-chan holds dear, so do I. It will come with us wherever we go."

Now on the main drag, he spotted a car or two, but still the traffic was unusually light. Hamada's heart sunk.

"What in the world's become of this city?"

He tried to hail a taxi. They shot past him, as if escaping to places elsewhere.

"At this rate, a cop car would suffice. An ambulance. The one time you need one, and there isn't one in sight!"

He fretted like the hysterical transvestite he was. From the left pocket of his jacket a raspy voice answered him, "*One is—coming*."

"Oh. Thanks."

"*One is—coming. But do not—get on. Terrible things—will happen*."

"How much more terrible can things get?"

The irritated Hamada twisted his body back and forth as it was battered mercilessly by the wind and rain.

"My mistress's honorable younger sister," said the candle flame in cynical tones.

Standing next to the flickering yellow light, the pretty, golden-haired girl looked up at the ceiling.

"Why the attitude?" the ceiling replied.

The girl raised the gold candlestick higher. The penumbra grew larger, casting its vague light on a curious object. A fat shadow hung upside down from the ceiling like a hock of ham. It was a person and

it was moving around, as if attempting to escape the same fate as a hock of ham.

"A call came from the ward government building," said the doll girl. "They asked for the mayor. They seem to be in a panic."

"Relax. He is being held captive by a nightmare. I gave him medicine, but this is a vexation of the spirit. No simple answers here. We'll at least wait until morning."

"But—"

"Let's get this straight. Big sister left things betwixt and between with you. I'm the one who put Humpty Dumpty back together again. That's me, Tonbeau Nuvenberg. So take care for what you say."

"I am thankful for that. However, this is my mistress's house. Until she returns, it is my duty to protect it."

"So you're not telling me where the safe is?"

"The rumors precede you, Tonbeau-sama."

"*Hmph*. Nothing but lies and gossip. What rumors?"

"That you're a spendthrift with a penchant for defaulting on her loans."

"*Hmph*."

"A petty swindler and con artist."

"*Hmph*."

"A mad scientist with a taste for the prohibited and the taboo. Though on a small scale."

"*Hmph*."

"With a fetish for making homunculi, and all of them male."

"Enough already." She stamped her foot on the ceiling.

"And one more. The reason she left the Czech Republic was to collect certain symbols of male virility, the larger—"

"What are you saying, pipsqueak!" The fat witch shouted and clomped across the ceiling with long strides. "A sassy lass like you—you should have your heart and womb swapped out and bulrush reeds installed instead of those glass veins of yours."

"Only one may do with my body as he wishes, and that person is not a witch."

"You talk big for such a little squirt of a thing." She puffed out her cheeks. "It's time to slap your hands with a little mumbo jumbo of my own."

She began to chant. The candle flame flickered. Then a knocking came against the glass of the skylight.

"Nevermore."

"Ah, it's back."

"Good timing."

The fat shadow stamped her feet again. The doll girl went to the wall and pulled on the rope attached to the skylight. Wind and rain and a pair of black wings swept in.

"So this is our mistress's honorable younger sister?" the big

raven said, doing its best to get her goat. To the doll girl, “I’ve been flying around Shinjuku all day. I found what we’ve been looking for.”

“You tell stuff like that to me first!” Tonbeau tried to grab the bird. It easily evaded her.

“You’d better hurry. Things are getting dicey out there.”

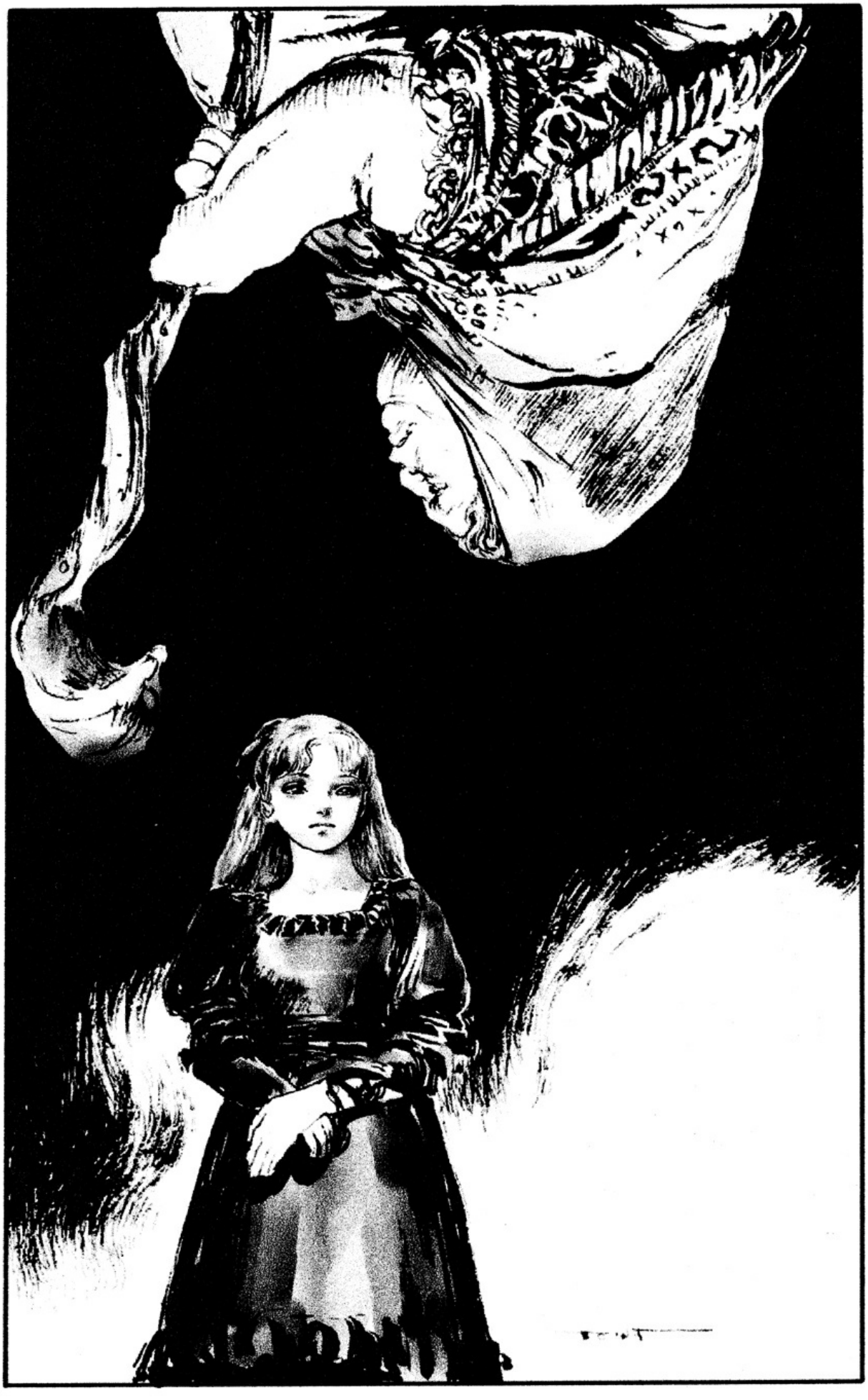
“What is?”

“Explain yourself!”

“In fact—” The big raven spread his wings expansively.

Night.

People had all but forgotten the true meaning of the word. At first glance, the artificial day drove out the dark. The buildings glittered, street lights glimmered, neon signs flickered. And in this city, night watchmen glowed in the dark, as did glass guard dogs with bioluminescent serum injected into their veins.



There was nowhere in the city where a man out for a midnight stroll didn't cast a shadow.

The night shift had come alive decades before. Bars, restaurants, dance clubs, coffee shops, supermarkets—something to fulfill all the appetites—ran twenty-four seven. And to maintain the intellectual vigor of the ward, a flowering of all-night bookstores and literary salons.

Of course, television never went off the air. With a combination cell phone/remote control, satellite networks could bring to the screen any show from anywhere on the globe at the click of a button.

If deeper companionship was in order, and the customary interactive social networks and chat rooms didn't suffice, at an "Another One" kiosk, along with a drop of a hallucinogenic, the prettiest girl in the world or the friend she'd never met were theirs for two hours at a pop.

Stumble into the rare unlit alleyway or onto a dark street corner, and spit out a wad of flash-bang gum. When stepped on, it would pop and strobe and generally give any creature a start.

And so ordinary people no longer feared the night. Which was why, finding himself alone on a vacant avenue, a man was apt to become hyper-aware of his own existence, to hear footsteps always racing up behind him, and see shapes lurking in the shadows that weren't there.

Now, the meaning of the night bore down upon him. The night came calling, like it or not. Cloaked in that jet-black veil, the

incomprehensible was always lying in wait.

The night was not the place to live a life. The night was the sum of the cries and prayers and fears of the unknown stirred together in the muddy currents of the psyche. To set them aside for a spell, human beings were given sleep.

But what of those eternal insomniacs?

The Quarry knew it was being pursued. In front of it was a concrete wall stacked with steel drums. An escape route reached out behind. Except that the rulers of that turf were the ones closing in.

The Quarry craned its ears. The drugs cranking up the five senses hadn't lost their effectiveness. Its weapons still hadn't been used.

But common sense said that the Predator had powers that exceeded them. The point of this "game" was to ascertain their rumored effectiveness when ramped up to a hundred percent.

The Quarry could only pray that the radioactive tags inside its body didn't wink out at the wrong moment.

Two glowing objects streaked through the air. Aerial torpedoes. The Quarry quickly opened its mouth and coughed up a net of magnetic mines. Spitting fire before falling to the road's surface, hundreds of pea-sized "pellet mines" dispersed into the air at a safe-enough distance of fifteen feet, creating a net a little over a dozen feet square.

The first shot plunged deep into the net. Flashes of blue light bloomed in the gloom. The shock waves and the smell and thunder of the explosions unfurled around.

The one after that had just enough time for the navigation unit to change direction and skirt the top of the net. Calculating the most direct course, the “torpedo” took direct aim on the Quarry.

The pressure-sensitive screws cut through the atmosphere as the angle of the fins swished around. The Quarry’s internal silo opened its hatch. The anti-torpedo countermeasures fired and attacked the enemy weapon with active sonar pinging.

The impact took place within the danger zone.

The shock wave blew the Quarry backwards a dozen feet, into the wall of steel drums. Thanks to modifications of its nervous system, it felt no pain. It quickly righted itself and listened carefully. But sensed or heard nothing. The Predator must be in wait-and-see mode.

Better to stop breathing altogether, the Quarry thought. The enemy must have the means of detecting fluctuations in carbon monoxide levels.

A thick arm wrapped tightly around its head. Before the titanium steel could dig into its windpipe, the Quarry pushed itself forward with all its strength and heaved it over its shoulder.

The Predator twisted its body with excruciating slowness and pulled away. A short, stocky frame. Its silver torso rapidly rose and fell, drawing its energy from the air. Due to its steeply sloping shoulders, its whole body seemed to transform into a pair of hands.

The Predator stopped a dozen feet away. The outlines of its body faded into the rain.

I get it now, the Quarry thought.

The nature of this false reality—submersible vessels. Two attack submarines. The atmosphere was the ocean. They were at the bottom of the sea.

The enemy rapidly blurred, and disappeared in less than a second. The Quarry looked for splashes in the rain. Even if it extended the magnetic fields beyond its line of vision, detecting a reaction to energy as well as mass was essential.

The rain fell harder. The feedback from its five senses markedly decreased. It clucked to itself. Where were those splashes of rain?

A sharp pain slashed down its back. *On its six again*. The Quarry ground its teeth as it fell to the ground. Ten feet above and behind it, the enemy brandished a knife. Its pig-like face contorted with mad glee. Did every killer evince such emotions in the act of murder?

The Quarry fired a "torpedo" from its shoulder blade. The Predator's smile darkened. The torpedo smashed through its face and into the concrete wall. No sooner had the fireball erupted than did a scream behind it.

Before it could right itself, water splashed and danced on the roadway. Something unseen writhed on the pavement. The Quarry sensed a human presence to its left.

Within the gray downpour, a long shadow creased the smoke. A sad figure, the Quarry thought, though without any good reason. The shadow had no right hand. Only the sleeve swaying there limply.

Chapter Three

"Who are you?"

"I am called Ryuuki," the shadow replied. A masculine voice suffused with centuries of patina. Any man who spoke thusly could make any listener rest easy and forget the world. "You are—a woman."

"Yes," answered the Quarry, watching the splashes grow stiller. A shot must have penetrated the nuclear generator at its heart. "Why did you help me?" she asked, not averting her eyes from the invisible death in front of her.

"When a woman is assaulted by a man, I cannot stand idly by and do nothing. Besides—"

"Besides?"

"I do not like watching people get killed."

"What about him?"

"He's not dead. He should revive in another thirty minutes or so."

"Oh," the Quarry said softly.

"Can I ask you what's been going on?"

"Aren't you an odd one. Nobody much cares about the life or death of others around these parts. They've seen too much."

"They have hardly seen enough. They need to see much, much

more, until they cannot bear what their own eyes are telling them. And then somehow resolve to end it."

"Where are you from? Are you a rookie?"

"You should go."

The gray shadow called Ryuuki solemnly turned around. *Solemnly*. The word was at once perfectly appropriate and yet didn't resemble him at all.

"Wait!" The Quarry ran after him. "Where are you going?"

"No place in particular. Wherever strikes my fancy."

"Don't be such a stoic. You came to my rescue. I can offer you something to eat and a roof over your head."

"No, thank you."

"I won't take no for an answer. My name is Miyako Masaki."

The Quarry—Miyako—reached out and put her hand on Ryuuki's shoulder. The feeling was not what the damp cloth suggested. She pulled back her hand and looked at the palm, at the clumps of gray dust sticking to it.

She blinked. The man's garb was made of black fabric woven with gold and silver threads. Sticking to it was something that wasn't quite mud and wasn't quite dust, a kind of optical illusion.

Ryuuki kept on going. Miyako was suddenly struck by the feeling that she couldn't let him go. "Wait! Let me explain what's going on."

“Think about it, and you should realize that it doesn’t matter.”

“I work for a weapons developer in greater Tokyo,” she said, catching up with him. A silver light silently jutted out from her shoulder blades. “They conduct experiments here in Demon City they definitely can’t outside Shinjuku. The weapons they’re working on right now involve human beings *becoming* weapons, rather than merely controlling them.”

“Human beings,” Ryuuki mused to himself. Miyako brightened, sensing that she’d caught his interest. “I saw the same in my time. Soldiers with gunpowder strapped to their bodies launched into enemy camps via catapult. Operatives imbued with the spirits of monkeys or tigers. After fending for themselves in the wilds for a half-year or so, they would be directed toward an unsuspecting village.”

“You’re Chinese, right? What era are you talking about?”

A dull explosion resounded behind them. Ryuuki turned and fixed his gaze on Miyako. The rain grew colder. She shivered.

“I said I did not desire to see any more death. But perhaps I could stay with you tonight?”

“But of course.” Miyako nodded. “Fortunately, my place isn’t far.”

Miyako’s pad was located in the slums of Ichigayadai. The city of course didn’t advertise itself. It was infamous for its large population of criminals. As a result, it didn’t do much business with neighboring burgs, and the means by which its citizens earned their

daily bread were varied and often quite specialized.

Such as Miyako's job as a "quarry."

Testing the effectiveness and power of anti-personnel weapons on human beings was the far more efficient route. But no matter how big and politically connected the company, skirting the laws and taboos against human experimentation was not easy in the outside world.

Were such things to come to light, even the biggest conglomerate in the world would be in for a world of hurt. The bigger they grew, the larger the target. The more public opinion mattered, the more government agencies and independent watchdog groups clamored for oversight and access.

The fate of one of Europe's largest oil companies, dismantled by a single-page indictment, was still fresh in every businessman's mind.

Demon City was the ideal environment for any number of reasons. Not only could an assassin be hired for a bottle of cheap wine and a credit card, but so could the victim. Neither was in short supply.

At first, most of the quarries were possessed by demons or otherwise mentally impaired. Obviously it was impossible to test a weapon's true abilities without an enemy that fought back.

The company sent out feelers for quarries with a fighting spirit, offering to cover the retrofitting and reconstruction costs on top of the usual fees. The perfect business to suit the needs of the criminal

element hiding out in Shinjuku. And so day in and day out, strangely-outfitted soldiers engaged in impromptu battles in the back alleys and vacant lots of Demon City.

In a corner of one of Shinjuku's persistent ruins, the rain drummed down on an abandoned medical clinic, on the cheap makeshift houses and plastic tarps. Days like this in particular brought the tragic memories closer to the surface and permeated the ruins with an air of gloom and doom.

No small relief then, to at least see lights glowing in the small windows and the friendly fires burning beneath the eaves.

"This way," she said, indicating their destination.

Two small shadows darted out of one of the buildings there amidst the ruins, calling out, "Mama! Mama!"

A boy of five or six and a girl a little younger. They were both wearing T-shirts and jeans.

"You have children," Ryuuki observed in a low voice.

"And a husband."

"A husband, too?"

"His body's a wreck. Hard to look at. But we keep him in another room, so it's all good."

"Is he our guest?" asked the boy, looking up at Ryuuki.

"Yes."

The girl clapped her hands in delight.

“Unfortunately, no,” Ryuuki said quietly. “I only saw your mother home. And now I will take my leave.”

“This is quite unusual for the children.” Miyako gently pulled on Ryuuki’s sleeve. “Living in a bad part of town, they don’t get out very often.”

“That being the case, now is not a good time to start.” Ryuuki backed away. “I clearly should not have come. I think it’s better if we pretend we never met.”

He turned and began walking away. Miyako didn’t run after him.

A dozen or so steps later, Ryuuki stopped. Something like dust danced around him. He slowly retraced his steps. For some reason, Miyako put her arms around the children and pulled them closer. She must have sensed she was making a grave mistake.

“I guess I don’t wish to get any more wet than I already am,” Ryuuki said sadly. “I wouldn’t mind spending the night.”

Above his head came the caw of a crow.

When Tonbeau Nuvenberg and the doll girl got out of the taxi, the ruins were still and quiet.

The doll girl looked up. “General Ryuuki was spotted here an hour and a half ago. We can only pray that nothing untoward has happened.”

“Hmph. These vampires like putting on masks as much as they like putting on airs,” Tonbeau groused. “Here, there and everywhere with their blood-red eyes and fangs, hiding their true natures beneath

black cloaks. They're really cowards who go after girls who can't resist them. Try that on a regular rug-rat and they'd run screaming at the first bite."

"Even so, it's awfully quiet," said the doll girl, calmly examining their surroundings.

Here and there burned electric lights and fires in steel drums. But there were no other signs of human life.

"Let's go."

"I don't think so," Tonbeau said, shaking her head in disagreement. "My big sister was born with a generous heart that made her willing to serve her fellow man for free. Not me. I have no desire to go chasing after creatures who could ruin my day at the slightest provocation. This was entirely the idea of you and that crow."

"You do know no shame," the doll girl said with a weariness that belied her outward age. "So you will be content to go your entire life being known for nothing in her own right but my mistress's younger sister."

"Fine with me!" Tonbeau clapped her hands together contemptuously. "Call me a two-ton coward, sully my name as a back-alley witch, do whatever. I am craven to the core, and proud of it!"

"Then why did you come all the way here?"

"Why, it's obvious, isn't it? Should worst come to worst and you lost your little head, who would be left to crack open that vault? But

it's getting to look like the worst could happen to *me*, and that's the cue for me to exit stage left."

"Then you are free to tremble here in fear. If you would excuse me."

The doll girl stepped away and raised her hand. The big raven descended like a black omen. Without a backward glance, the bird and the girl set off toward the ruined buildings.

"Something stinks," said the raven. "Keep on your toes!"

Several bodies were lying next to one of the burning drums. Blood gathered on their chests like oozing smoke. The doll girl took one corpse by the hand and pulled it to a sitting position. The man's neck slumped at an odd angle. His throat was cut all the way through. Down to the vertebrae.

She spoke a brief prayer for the dead and lay the body down. "The exsanguination is too severe for the work of a mere murderer. From the condition of the blood, he was killed not more than an hour ago."

"But of course." The big raven looked to the sky and cawed. "Somebody is in that building."

"Let's go find them," the doll girl said, her voice filling with determination.

Part Thirteen: The Burning Cross

Chapter One

The doll girl took three steps toward the ruined building. She looked back over her shoulder. “You won’t be coming with?”

Tonbeau Nuvenberg frowned. But didn’t move.

“What a wimp,” the raven cawed derisively. “She really is our mistress’s sister? That attitude sure don’t suit the family name.”

“I don’t disagree. We are only doing what your big sister asked us to do. Won’t you pitch in and help?”

“Enough with the jokes. I’m here to sponge off my sister. That’s all.” She stamped her feet. The layers of fat quivered. The raven covered its mouth with a wing to keep from laughing out loud.

“I understand,” the doll girl said frostily. “Then please wait here.” She spun around and entered the lobby of the building.

A bare bulb burned in the ceiling of the lobby. The dim glow only accentuated the stark and desolate interior. The doll girl glanced up the staircase on the right. “Can you smell that?”

“Yeah,” the raven answered. “But it’s not that strong. Must not have been a lot of it.”

“Perhaps it’s drifted away somewhere.” The words issuing from the rose-red lips were both dainty and terrifying.

The big raven flapped its wings. “I saw something that looked human on the second floor. Let’s go.”

“Yes.”

The golden-haired girl started for the stairs when a noise came from above. “Rubber-soled shoes,” said the raven.

“Maybe the assailant.”

“Maybe so. Better keep a sharp eye out.”

“Indeed.”

The doll girl paused a foot from the stairwell. Even if Nuvenberg no longer lived, her mission was etched upon her glass heart. Her cherubic face evinced no hesitation even when the fight to the finish in front of her came from another world.

The footsteps—that sense of something else present—descended toward them. She first saw the ankle of a jean-clad leg. A thin ankle. A woman’s. Her hands next appeared, folded in front of her chest. Her face. A pretty, pale face. Completely empty of emotion.

The doll girl’s eyes focused on her hands. Here was the cause of her soulless state. Filling her arms were the heads of two children. Even in the dim light, the waxy, pale skin cast the harsh surroundings into cruel and heartless relief. She noticed the visitors and came to a halt at the same time. Her arms sagged, as if becoming aware of the weight in them.

“Who are you?” she asked, in a mechanical voice that only heightened the tragedy of her circumstances.

“A Czech witch sent us,” the doll girl said. “We are looking for someone. A Chinese man with one arm.”

“He ran away.” The woman glanced up. “When I wasn’t looking, he snuck into their bedroom and—when I went to check on them—that man—his fangs—in Yoshimi’s neck—”

“Where did he go after that?”

No sooner had the doll girl asked the question than an ear-splitting scream came from the direction of the lobby door—from none other than Tonbeau Nuvenberg.

“Outside,” said the big raven alighting on the doll girl’s shoulder, and she whirled around.

“We will avenge your loss,” the doll girl said by means of *goodbye*. Running over to where Tonbeau was sitting on her ample ass, she observed a shadow fleeing to the east. “After him,” she ordered.

The raven flew off.

The fat witch slumped on the ground. “Are you all right?” the doll girl asked dispassionately.

“Look! Look! A one-armed man with blood all over his mouth. I’ve seen a lot of vampires in my time, but that’s the scariest.”

“You said they were no big deal not more than a few minutes ago.”

“I also copped to being a coward about it. Do something about it!”

“You’re a witch. Do something about it yourself,” the doll girl said. The caw of a crow came from some distance away. “It’s spotted

something. I'm going."

"You intend to leave your mistress's little sister here to fare for herself? You're not human!"

"You are correct. I am not human."

"You're just a piece of junk doll."

The doll girl dodged the gob of saliva spurting from the thick lips and dashed off. She looked up at the sky. The silhouette of the bird turning through the air reflected clearly in her eyes, darker than the dark sky. It was not a hundred yards to the point the bird was presently circling over.

The cute girl's death struggle was about to begin. And her opponent was General Ryuuki.

She came to a halt. The flat field—that by now hardly qualified as "ruins"—stretched out in front of her. It glimmered like glass, and seemed to draw in the moonlight like water. There were no shadows of trees or grass or rubble, as they too had fled the loathsome terrain for their own safety.

A turquoise fog shrouded her gaze, hugging the ground like the creatures that made their home at the bottom of the sea. The only thing alive in the quarter-mile diameter wasteland made the radiation detectors squeal whenever they drew near, and the redevelopment personnel carrying them break out in a cold sweat. This slick green creature's true nature was radioactivity.

As soon as she set foot inside its perimeter, the doll girl took note of the strange feel of the land.

The rough asphalt was smooth as glass, the result of being bombarded with intense heat. If the tourists breezing in from the outside world knew that a micro-scale nuclear war had been waged here half a year earlier, they would tuck their tails between their legs and run back to where they came from.

Assuming they could wrap their minds around the fact that people like them in the world they knew had their own nuclear weapon stockpiles for personal use.

All in an afternoon's work for the so-called scientists of Shinjuku.

During the 1970s, an engineer in a secret U.S. lab designed a hand-held nuke. The only obstacle to deployment was miniaturizing the materials and the electronics. But once those hurdles were overcome, the specialists knew that success was eventually guaranteed.

Devices with much higher yields, small nuclear furnaces, and uranium fuel were popular items in Shinjuku's specialized pawnshops. For a time, Kabuki-cho's wise guys ran a side business trading them. When undercover agents reported this information to the horrified mayor, he immediately cracked down on the dealers and the smuggling routes.

Before the sweep was completed, a pair of psychotic yakuza godfathers got their gangs into a turf war, with a mushroom cloud signaling the final act.

The missiles were said to come from the Okawa Chemical Company in Yotsuya Sanchome. A well-established pawnshop in

Yaraicho reportedly supplied the nuke-enabled Colt Government .45s. But as both sides were incinerated in the incident, the actual facts of the situation remained a mystery.

In the wake of this dreadful and dreadfully surprising Armageddon, the area was deemed a Secondary-Class Danger Zone (SDZ), cloaked as it was in a miasma of residual radiation. And into that wasteland stepped the stalwart doll girl.

Proceeding to the center with careful steps, the doll girl took a blue ribbon from the pocket of her dress. The same bright color as her eyes. Her small hands pulled her hair behind her and clumsily tied it into a bun. With such a sweetly sad sense of determination, this doll resolved in her mind to cast off whatever constituted her tiny mortal coil.

"General Ryuuki!" Her voice was strong and clear. "Together with Galeen Nuvenberg, we drove a stake into your chest. I am the one who destroyed the woman who attaches herself to you. Present yourself!"

The raven cawed above her head. A blue, moonlit night in Shinjuku. Then something reverberated against the doll girl's crystalline eardrums—the musical sound of a plucked string accompanied by a low tenor voice.

He dreamed last night

of flowers falling into a pond

Alas, he cannot return home

though the spring is half gone

The Yangtze bears the spring

inexorably to its rest

As the moon once again sets

into the waters of the west

But the season was not spring, and the place was Demon City. The doll girl stood stock still in the turquoise light, listening with a kind of reverence even. And when the music ceased, she called out again, “General Ryuuki.”

“Do you mean me?” the answer came, close by.

The radioactive haze obscured the doll girl’s senses. But she waited. A breeze dolefully stirred the mist. The silhouette appeared as if from behind a veil, his hair drawn back in a pony tail, his right arm missing below the elbow.

He held with his mouth a small, lute-shaped instrument, anchoring it against his chest and strumming it with his free hand.

“That is a lovely sound,” the doll girl said.

“It is called *Silent Night*,” Ryuuki replied softly. The name of the koto. He showed no inclination of taking her for granted. “I intended to run, but thought better of it. Can such a small champion defeat me?”

“I do not know.” She observed the smudged outlines of his silhouette and said, “That ash—”

“The girl you killed. Her name is Shuuran.”

“I remember.”

“I would have preferred to be killed by you as well. But Shuuran insists I fight. Is that acceptable to you?”

“That is fine,” she said, in a voice so severe as to suggest sorrow at the thought.

Ryuuki smiled, but not condescendingly. The pluck of the small doll clearly impressed him. He gently strummed the strings. A most beautiful chord, like jewels falling onto a china plate.

The doll girl slipped to the right. Swallowed up by the turquoise glow, she disappeared from Ryuuki’s field of view.

“The power of *Silent Night* does not work on her. What should we do, Shuuran? Ah, she springs on us from above.”

His hand rose to the vertical. The invisible shock wave radiated into the sky, flinging the small body silently to the ground thirty feet away. The sound of gears arose as the doll girl engaged in an intense self-exam. She rose to her feet.

“I am impressed,” she said, just as cold and hard.

“That was my severing *qi*. That would rend leather like tissue paper. My penetrator *qi* would kill a tiger. And yet there you are without a mark. How will you answer?”

“Like this.”

She clasped her white hands in front of her satin dress. Ryuuki didn’t move—not because he didn’t take her seriously—but because

this peerless warrior was curious to see what skills such a cute opponent would wield against him.

A silky gauze curtain descended from her head. It wasn't the rain. The moon shone high above in the sky. Ryuuki's body erupted in white-hot flame.

"Acid?" he said admiringly, as the white smoke engulfed him.

"I apologize for relying on the help of outside forces."

The doll girl's voice swam through the air. Just before making contact with Ryuuki's chest, she raised her right hand. A wooden stake streaked down vertically. With perfect timing, her hand closed around it. And in the same motion, plunged it into Ryuuki's chest.

His surprise was total. The doll girl's stake pierced his heart and jutted out his back.

The taut tearing sound reversed. The stake sprang out again, repelled by a greater force, the recoil breaking the doll girl's hand. The stake fell to the earth.

As soon as she'd observed the dust gathering thickly around Ryuuki's left breast, she wrapped her other arm around his neck. The acid attacked her hands. A fresh puff of white smoke.

"What are you doing?" he calmly asked, as his hair and face scalded and burned. He knew that this slight girl was a soldier in her own right, who would fight valiantly to the bitter end.

"The blood flowing through my veins becomes a deadly poison when touched by moonlight. And fortunately, the moon is out."

“You will be destroyed as well.”

“I had resigned myself to that inevitability from the beginning.”

“You almost leave me at a loss for words. However, I shall not die. The outlaw can only be struck down by the hand of an outlaw, and the dead must bury the dead.”

“Then what shall we do about you?”

“I do not know.”

The doll girl had been holding her breath. Her intent had been to rupture the lungs and heart and shower him with her precious bodily fluids.

A powerful force threw her off him. The ash. The embodiment of Shuuran’s thoughts and intentions that had remained behind in this mortal plane to protect Ryuuki still possessed that much power.

Ryuuki stretched out his arm. A second blow from his *qi* would constitute a certain messenger of death. The odorless, colorless energy poured out, ionizing the air. Just as the black flapping of wings descended in front of the doll girl.

With a shrill scream, the wrenched and twisted bird fell twitching to the earth.

“A raven,” said the startled Ryuuki.

Just then a point of flame flew into his chest. It blossomed into a ball of fire, two fist-sized hemispheres growing out of his front and back.

As if pushing the blue-green mist aside, a long shadow and

footsteps approached. Miyako stopped beside the doll girl.

"I came to atone for my children." She fixed her eyes on Ryuuki. The turquoise mist crawled about her ankles. She said in a monotone, "I deserve punishment. I invited the madman into my house."

Miyako's right shoulder turned half of a complete revolution. With a faint metallic sound, a missile launcher jutted out from the exposed cavity. The magazine held three rounds.

"This is pointless," the doll girl said at Miyako's feet. "This man can't be harmed by missiles or lasers. Not so long as he is the man who made you a vampire."

"Get out of here," Miyako said. "He is mine. Hurry!"

The missiles shot out like incandescent needles trailing burning threads. Ryuuki raised his arm. The napalm warheads blazed to life. Ryuuki's silhouette rose up inside the inferno and melted away.

"That's that," said Miyako.

"No."

"Those incendiaries burn at seven-thousand degrees."

"The fires of hell would have no more effect. Measures based in science will never prove sufficient."

"Yeah. Tell me something I don't know," said the raven in a strained voice, dragging itself across the ground.

"Are you all right?" The doll girl ran up to it and cradled the lifeless-looking body in her arms.

“I’m fucking freezing here. It’s that damned demon *qi*. Seems he hasn’t given up on the wisdom of the East.”

“That is for certain,” said the doll girl, turning her attention to the bonfire. The turquoise bands turned timidly around the orange rings until, as if seized by a sudden conviction or beckoned by some strange impulse—like radioactive moths to the flame—they drew themselves in.

The raven cawed loudly. Miyako’s voice was clearer. “What the hell!” A human shape materialized within the blaze of crimson. “Not even napalm will burn it—”

Miyako’s body reconfigured itself into battle mode. The sensors in her chest calculated the atmospheric ionization and set the aperture angle of the electrical discharge plates. She looked like a human lotus flower spreading its petals.

The surge of energy from the atomic generator at her waist poured from Miyako toward the human figure in the inferno. It bleached the color out of the napalm, turning the flames in wavering black shadow into a whitewashed world.

Miyako staggered. The world returned to its normal hues.

“What is the matter?”

“It appears the radioactivity is having its effect.” Miyako slumped to one knee. “Under normal circumstances, it wouldn’t be a problem. But I already came through one battle tonight. My repairs haven’t completed yet.”

“You should leave,” the doll girl said.

“Not yet. He’s still coming.”

As if he had been listening in, Ryuuki stepped toward them, placing one burning foot ahead of the other. What could a soul turned to fire tell the heart and mind to do? To live or die? To love or to slaughter?

Chapter Two

The rain stopped, but the pedestrian traffic hadn't increased. Nor were any buses running. The silver platter of the moon almost made Hamada want to kneel and worship like the ancients.

What in the world was this city turning into? Something frenzied and mad was growing about its foundations. Some unnoticed thing deep within the earth had awakened. This world may simply have been the dream that thing dreamed.

"Twenty more minutes. C'mon, hurry it up."

He was speaking of the night shift bus. At this time of day, buses came around once an hour. They'd gotten to the bus stop five minutes before, so it wasn't likely that it'd already come and gone. For the night shift workers, punctuality was a matter of life and death, so the mass transit system in Shinjuku did its level best to run on time.

Even if he kept on going past the bus stop, a taxi wasn't likely to pick him up. The cabbie would take one look at Hamada and speed up. They had no choice but to wait.

"Fucking A!" Hamada kicked the asphalt. Then, sensing something behind him on his right, he turned around.

Through the damp, dark air came a crowd of shadows. At least fifty people, a hundred yards away. But he couldn't relax. Their presence did anything but reassure him. Reacting instinctually to the

black curtain of fear unfolding around him, he turned the other way.

And felt a cold stab down his spine like a knife against the skin. More were coming from that direction too. The faint possibility remained that they were only there to catch the bus. But why did their eyes flash like brake lights? What was with the ones in front, holding out their arms and crooked hands in front of them? They looked like wild beasts readying to spring on their prey.

"What the hell—we're out of here." He started to cross the street and stopped in his tracks. They were coming from the right and the left, inexorably. For the first time he noticed that he heard no footsteps.

A cold sense of isolation wrapped around the transvestite gangbanger. His teeth chattered. But then—his countenance glowed. An inexplicable change was born in his mind. Without conscious thought or reason, he embraced death. At the same time, the fear transformed to heroism.

The comely young man on his back—he would die for him. This was the heart of a valiant knight pledged to protect the beautiful princess against the legions of her enemies.

The rain washed away the eyeliner and face powder and now his countenance shone with a fresh vigor. He turned his head and looked at Setsura, leaning against his shoulder. "Sorry. If nobody else, I had every intent of protecting you, but it looks like a botched job at best. Allow me to at least lead the way."

That sense grew of being surrounded on all sides. Fifty yards now separated them from the strange crowds. Hamada cocked his

head to the side and stared at the roadway. An elated look came to his face as the sound of the big bus engine rumbled down the street.

"It's coming! Aki-chan. It's coming!" He literally danced for joy, vigorously shaking Setsura and the grocery bag in his hand.

A wave of discord rippled through the crowd. Several jumped into the street. The headlights of the bus glared down at them like the eyes of a stalking beast. They spread their arms wide, their silhouettes briefly carving vivid shadows in the ring of light, and then a sharp report as they were thrown out of the way.

"Hurry!"

The herd stomped against the ground and stampeded toward Hamada. He settled into a fighting stance. The pounding of the feet became a dull roar. The bulky blue-gray frame glided up beside him, accompanied by the loud squeal of brakes.

With the hiss of pressurized air, the doors opened. Grabbing the railing with the same hand holding the bag, Hamada raced up the stairs. "Get out of here!" he shouted at the driver.

The door closed with a heavy *thump*, followed by a series of heavy *thuds* from outside the bus.

"They ain't passengers! Get going!"

"Don't have it say it twice," the driver smiled.

The bus rabbited away as quickly as a vehicle that size could. Hamada just managed to catch himself from falling over. Holding onto the strap, he peered out the windows. The mad herd

disappeared into the distance.

He breathed a sigh of relief and glanced around the bus. These night shift buses usually had people standing in the aisles, but tonight there were several empty seats. Half the passengers he would have otherwise expected. And most of them were slumped back in their seats, eyes closed.

Well, not that surprising. This wasn't exactly a tour bus, and in the dead of night there wasn't anything to look at anyway. But what was that smell?

The odor of blood.

"He's not feeling well?" an older man called from the back of the bus. "You can sit down here."

A perfectly normal offer made in perfectly normal tones. Hamada felt the tension draining out of him. "Um—"

"It's all right. I'm a doctor.

"Great! Just what we're looking for!"

He hurried down the aisle and laid Setsura on the bench seat beneath the rear window. The man who identified himself as a doctor sat to his left. He was wearing long gray robes. His white beard nearly reached the floor. He was holding a gnarled wooden cane.

"Hoh, a fine-looking man."

This honest exclamation reassured Hamada. "He is, isn't he? Shinjuku's most handsome. Some say that honor belongs to the doctor who works at Mephisto Hospital, but they're idiots. They

can’t see the real beauty inside. If you don’t mind me saying so, old man, but—”

“Call me Kikiou.”

“Well, Kikiou-san. I am truly head over heels for him. The only man I could ever say that about.”

“And I’m sure he’d appreciate hearing that.”

“I wonder what’s wrong with him?”

“Oh, nothing serious. He was likely caught up in a dimensional vortex.”

“A what?”

“Wasn’t there was an earthquake this morning? It happened when two dimensions brushed against each other. He was in the vicinity at the time, and was dragged into the other world. He came here from my world.”

“Then who are you?” Hamada put his arms around Setsura and backed down the aisle.

“You can leave him here,” Kikiou said. “I will not only spare you, but generously reward you, even with eternal life.”

“Driver!” Hamada barked. “Stop the bus! We’re getting off!”

“Sorry, but we’re on a nonstop route today.” The cheerful young man glanced over his shoulder and winked at him.

“Nonstop? What’s that supposed to mean? Who are you?”

“I’m Yakou,” he said, flashing a smile.

"What are you doing here? Did you come here to kill Aki-san?

"Oh, no," said Kikiou, shaking his head. "We wouldn't do anything like that. That particular job belongs to somebody else." He nodded his head at the back window. "Like him."

The glass shattered. A bloated black mass hurled at him, a fist sweeping down from the ceiling. Hamada skittered backward several steps and once again hauled Setsura onto his back.

The assassin before him was wrapped in charred and tattered cloth. The bull-sized thing, like a grotesquely large bean bag—was in fact two people. The same as Hamada, the one was carrying the other—a long-haired woman—on his back.

Judging by his manner of entry, he'd either jumped onto the bus just before it left the stop or immediately afterwards. The only thing that could have slowed him down at that point was the woman he was carrying on his back.

Strangely enough, up to that point, Hamada hadn't recognized the ringleader of this murderous band. Instead of fear, a fierce light glowed in his eyes. The killer instinct.

"You are after Aki-chan," he said, his voice taking on that odd feminine touch. "Oh, I get it now. You took out my *anniki* too. Well, that is fine with me. With all of us here together, I'll strike you all down in one fell swoop."

"Now, now," the driver—Yakou—remonstrated. "Don't get in the way, Sir Kikiou. That's *their* job. It's not our place to obstruct or intervene. Let fate take us in whatever direction it wills. Like this—"

Yakou let go of the steering wheel and took the cap off his head. A red light lit up on the dashboard, the autopilot engaging. The night shift buses were all able to complete their runs even when the driver was indisposed.

"I wonder which one will finish Setsura off. Not that I'm taking sides. But where's the fun in fighting a spaced-out opponent? How about you patch him up first, eh, Kikiou?"

"It would require a certain kind of psychic shock. Something that would elevate the emotions for a split-second. The effects of a dimensional vortex affect the mind far more than the body."

A hard *clicking* sound came from the feet of the towering General Bey. A silver ball bearing. Hamada instantly recognized it as a pachinko ball. He said, "So my boss really let you have it, eh?"

The waterfall of balls flowed from General Bey's mouth, jingling and jangling onto the floor. Accompanied by a rattling beat like a snare drum, his body shrunk as a ton of polished steel spilled out of him. The pachinko balls covered his feet. Hamada reflexively found himself lifting up his feet, as if out of a drift of snow.

The stream petered to a trickle and stopped. "Urp," said the general, patting his stomach. He took a deep breath. His body returned to normal, though the hailstorm of ball bearings continued to roll down the aisle.

"The balls that other fellow spit at me," he said, without looking at Kikiou. "Quite effective when used as intended. But not on me."

"Setsura is right there," Kikiou said with a jerk of his chin. A

wily and treacherous smile creased the lips of the mighty warlock and alchemist. “Not you. Not you, Kazikli Bey. The girl on your back, put her down. It’s time for her to drink Setsura Aki’s blood.”

General Bey hesitated. His gut instincts resisted the instructions implanted by Mephisto. He was only allowed to act if Takako Kanan blundered in taking Setsura’s blood. And then only after destroying the blunderer.

“Not me, Demon Physician?” he groaned in pain, though it was more of a curse.

“That’s right,” answered Kikiou. “Your turn, Miss.”

Takako stood unsteadily in the aisle. Two glowing red points of light illuminated her pale face. Her eyes. Ah, what devilish command had Mephisto given her?

Takako took a deep breath and let it out. She opened her mouth, revealing her two fangs. Her breath was as cold as a winter rain. The image reflected in her crimson eyes was not Hamada but the beautiful young man on his back.

“Don’t come any closer!” Hamada said, swinging the grocery bag.

A hand reached in from the side and grabbed his wrist. The grip was icy and strong, like a vise clamping down to the bone. For a moment, Hamada forgot everything else and twisted his body to the right—and looked into the face of a young businessman, his short hair conservatively parted to one side. But the eyes burned with a crimson light, as did the eyes of those seated around him.

“Having surveyed the lay of the land, we predicted that you

would likely come to that particular bus stop. So we prepped the stage and assigned the players their parts before you arrived." Sitting in the driver's seat, now wearing a three-piece suit, Yakou cheerily described the unfolding scene. "Sir Kikiou thinks it all painfully overdone, but I enjoy a good production. When I lived in London, I so enjoyed the theatre life on Shaftesbury Avenue."

"Let go." Hamada tried to shake his arm free, but the hand holding his didn't budge.

"Hurry up and take care of them. Our world resides only in a temporary state of stability. The task of moving it to more peaceful climes awaits us."

Yakou smiled at Kikiou's impatience. "Sad to say we are boarders only and not owners of our own abodes. The health and humor of the landlady always comes first. But he has a point. Chop chop."

"Get back!"

To no avail. It surely seemed that his wrist was done for—when an unusual *thumping* sound resonated through the bus.

"Hoh!" said Yakou, his eyes narrowing to slits.

The onrushing vampires flew backwards, every one of them headless. They weren't ripped off. As soon as they laid hands on Hamada, a strange warping motion arose in his body. A moment later, the heads of the vampires exploded from within.

Hamada's forte wasn't the fierce power aroused by that movement, but the ability to transmit and control it in a flash from

the point of contact to the head of his opponent. No matter how powerful his enemies, as long as the source of the attack was close by, he was well-nigh invincible.

Looking over the rest of the passengers, now stopped in their tracks, Hamada declared with an overweening sense of self-confidence, “Do it nice and gentle-like, and I can make the most impotent man alive hard as a rock. Come one, come all, that’s what I say. And I’ll send you on to the next world as a reward. If not, stay where you are!”

Hamada moved decisively toward the driver. No matter how real the threats, he knew they wouldn’t be safe until they were off the bus.

“Looks like we’ll have to rely on General Bey, after all.”

Yakou’s words struck Kikiou forcefully. He wanted Takako dead and Hamada was the simplest means to those ends. Surely the man’s powers would kill her at once. Then the job of eliminating Setsura would fall to General Bey. That should prove the easiest solution to the problem.

This scheme Mephisto had dreamed up to kill Setsura was proving a time-wasting sideshow. As long as the problem was speedily dealt with, it didn’t matter if it was Takako or General Bey. Why go to such lengths to snare a comatose target? He had the feeling that Mephisto and even Yakou were playing him for a fool.

They’d only sent in Takako to start with because they had underestimated Hamada. Knowing what powers he wielded, they surely would have given the job to General Bey. Yakou’s interruption

earlier had momentarily cowed him, and he could not allow the humiliation to go unanswered now.

He called out, “General, are you just going to stand there?” The big man started moving even before the words could have fully registered.

“No shit! You really want a piece of me?” Hamada braced himself and poured energy into his muscles and sinews.

A crisp note sang out in the air. The general’s head ballooned to almost twice its normal size.

“How nice—of you—to—” said Hamada, blood pouring from his mouth.

A black ring formed around the base of his bull-sized neck. It thickened in a flash and the blood flooded out. His strange words of gratitude—he had somehow grasped that the invisible knives severing his neck were the same as Setsura’s.

General Bey sunk to his knees. And then again rose tottering to his feet. Black blood spilled from his ears and mouth and nose.

The warp traveling back down the sub-micron thin devil wire could not pulverize his head, so the damage stopped with his cranium and gray matter. However, thanks to the incomprehensible might of Princess’s regenerative powers, the resumption of whatever thought and reason that could be called “normal” was already shining in General Bey’s eyes.

With a jerk of his right hand, Hamada’s head separated from his shoulders and fell to the floor. The rest of his body slumped to the

aisle next to it, along with Setsura.

"I'm—sorry—Aki-chan—I gave it—my all—at least—"

The words dribbled from the bloody lips as he puckered a kiss in the direction of Setsura's mouth. The blood washed around the interior of the bus.

"Go, Takako. Now even you can finish him off," the general called in a hoarse voice.

"Thank you," said the most beautiful voice in the world.

It didn't belong to Takako. The black-clad figure rose from the floor like a shard of obsidian as Yakou and Kikiou and even General Bey stood there dumbstruck. In his right hand he held Hamada's head. In his left, the brown paper grocery bag. Through the tears and oily spots peeked the head of Galeen Nuvenberg.

"This is the least I can do to thank you." With that, he raised each head in turn and bestowed upon it a soft kiss. The beautiful genie, Setsura Aki. Like the gleaming statue of a beautiful angel lowered onto the grotesque stage.

Chapter Three

A knock at the door. A sound that would have utterly enchanted a normal person. But a normal person would have also recognized this as anything but a normal fist striking normal wood.

“Come in,” said the Demon Princess.

Mephisto pushed the door open and paused to examine the inside of the room. He hadn’t been in this room before. Kikiou had labs here and there in the manor house that no one other than Princess had ever entered.

Princess was lying on a long bronze bed. She raised only the upper half of her body. A grove of trees surrounded the bed, though the specific species was hard to tell. Clustered around the trunks—the top branches rising out of view—bushes a yard tall spread out their branches.

Mephisto narrowed his eyes. The shaded forest behind the canopy of the trees faded away into the distance. It seemed to him a scene created by a holographic projection.

“Why did you come here?” Princess raised a hand. On either side of the bed grew squat bushes that, instead of climbing higher, reached out their stout branches like arms, as far as the tip of Princess’s nose. The dangling fruit was the size of a winter cherry. She brought one to her mouth.

Whatever the fruit might be, the impression formed by her lips

closing around it was altogether lewd.

Mephisto ears pricked up at a wailing very much like human distress. He didn't answer Princess's question but drew closer as she popped several more of the fruits into her mouth. Each time a scream could clearly be heard.

The cries came from the fruit itself. Dotting the pale pink and green skin were human faces. Men and women and young and old. Knowing their fates, she plucked them from the branches and put them into her mouth and bit down, swallowing the gushing screams and the savory juices.

The blood stained her mouth red.

"And how do you find your appearance?" Mephisto asked, standing by the side of the bed.

"You don't want to know how I feel?" she countered, licking her lips with her bloody tongue. She placed a hand against her forehead. Her fingers slowly trailed down to the white fabric covering her breasts, precisely bisecting her body. Only several hours before, her body had been neatly divided in two along that same line.

"Is it simple pride? A lack of interest in the treatment of others? In either case, I don't see you taking the place of Kikiou."

"Putting Kikiou's body back together again was no easy task."

Perhaps sensing something in his tone of voice, a wary tint rose to her eyes. And just as quickly disappeared. "Yes, as I expected, the Demon Physician should come in very handy."

“And whose eyes are you seeing through?”

“Yakou and Bey.”

“Where are they?”

“In a bus traveling the streets of Demon City. They are presently headed toward Yotsuya.”

“So you have familiarized yourself with the geography?”

“I had the time. More than enough.”

“And what about Setsura?”

“He is sleeping. The shock of dimensional vortex has not worn off. He cannot easily awaken himself.”

“Would you know how to do so?”

“I know. Moreover, I could do it from here.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“And why not?” Princess demanded with an unexpected flash of emotion. “He is surrounded by Bey and Takako and Kikiou and Yakou. He will soon receive his just rewards for rending this body apart.”

“You love Setsura,” Mephisto said matter-of-factly. “Love can turn to hate and back again. You mustn’t give Setsura the opportunity to strike back.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to, Mephisto? Though I expect that the time will come when even you must be reminded of your place.”

“The ways of love are as numerous as the stars,” Mephisto said with an almost unctuous civility. “In that sense, your approach may be more straightforward. Yes, indeed. Those so impudent as to feign comprehension of the depth and breadth of my thoughts also find themselves, in time, consigned to the fires of hell.”

Princess warily observed the comely countenance spouting such mellifluous words. She had beheld countless people in her four thousand years. From the highest of the high to the lowest of the low, from the greatest of men to the meanest—she had seen them all from her ocean of blood.

And yet her senses whispered that this doctor was different. Not human. But human.

Confronted by this fair-complexioned face that could melt heaven and earth, the even more beautiful Princess—though well outside the laws of human conscience—felt a sense of unease ripple through her heart.

He was now at her beck and call. As Ryuuki had taken his blood, it was only natural that he should be. She should likewise be accorded every courtesy. And yet there was a cold and stark distance between them. She couldn’t dismiss the thought that he was secretly laughing at her behind her back.

Of course she had no doubts, if push came to shove, about her ability to utterly vanquish the Demon Physician. But until that moment came, just as Yakou was to Kikiou, Doctor Mephisto would remain her Achilles’ heel.

“I was pleased with your plan.” Princess plucked one of the

human-faced fruits and raked her nails across its surface. She showed it to Mephisto. Takako's face. "Right now, she is facing off against Setsura. Ah, the mortification of having his blood taken by the person he is sworn to protect. Hoh, strangely enough, that is something I understand better than he."

"Setsura cannot feel it himself?" Mephisto asked.

Princess hesitated. Setsura had lost consciousness.

Mephisto said icily, "You must not awake him. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Should Takako fail and General Bey kill her, Setsura will see none of it. But Takako will surely drink his blood. Striking while he is in this tranquil state is a sorely disappointing prospect, but unavoidable. Perhaps you should chew on this instead."

The slender hand plucked a fruit from the branch, rolled it around in his hand, and then handed it to Princess. The fruit featured Setsura's face. She took and examined it. The flash of repugnance was quickly replaced by a much brighter expression. She placed the beautiful fruit into her mouth and bit down hard.

The blood—the juice—trickled from the corners of her mouth. A scream, and the face of the little Setsura writhed in agony between her white teeth. Her eyes burned like hot coals. They focused on one spot above her. "I will make Setsura Aki one of us, but will not give him the easy way out."

"Princess—"

"Your words are futile. I will open his eyes." And she ground the

fruit between her teeth.

Several moments later, on a bus racing through Shinjuku's streets, Setsura Aki got to his feet.

"Surely a citizen of Shinjuku," Kikiou said in an amazed voice. A reaction to Setsura's powerful karma or to the terrible splendor of the scene before them—it was difficult to tell.

Had the great Italian artist Caravaggio gone mad and depicted in his famous painting Salome kissing the head of John the Baptist as it rested on the silver platter, the savage and mesmerizing beauty of the composition might have been comparable.

Yakou and Takako and even General Bey were equally dumbfounded—or utterly enraptured. However long the two kisses lasted—a second, a minute, an hour—they waited.

Eventually—after seconds rather than minutes or hours—Setsura set the two heads at the height of his waist. When he took his hands away, they hung there suspended in the air.

All at once, the time for the real battle had come.

Silently the heads of the remaining passengers flew off. And Takako launched herself at him. The attack never came. Even when he gently put his arms around her, she didn't move an inch.

"Wait!" called out General Bey.

Both Yakou and Kikiou pulled up. In this contest of *qi* against devil wire, the two demons dodged Setsura's attack. But what halted them in their tracks was not some new binding of Setsura's threads,

but a stern exclamation.

"*The eastern sky*," Setsura said ominously.

The eastern sky was directly tied to the morning sun. The sun itself had set not two hours before. Despite knowing that, the vampires shuddered with fear and briefly disconnected from the scene in front of them. The shock and tension Setsura had injected into the scene was that compellingly delivered.

The man in the black slicker sprang straight up as invisible knives cut through the air, punching two neat circles in the windows, but otherwise meeting with no resistance.

"Above us!" Yakou looked up. The stars appeared in a perfect square opening in the roof.

"Bastard!" The general whirled around and plunged through the back window as nimbly as a gymnast. He leapt onto the roof.

Setsura's silhouette stood there, striking as usual. But this wasn't the same Setsura. It was as if Demon City had awakened the beautiful genie to decorate the wet and starry night.

"You and I haven't met since our encounter at the Keio Plaza Hotel, Kazikli Bey."

The demon started forward and came to a halt, taking note of Setsura's transfiguration. "Return Takako," he moaned, every speck of the fearless warrior replaced by mad infatuation. "Give my wife back to me, Setsura Aki."

"Think back, Kazikli Bey," said Setsura, his voice deeper than

the night. “Your wife threw herself from the parapets of Poenari Castle. That night in 1462, watching as the fires of the Turkish siege troops filled the valleys, she gave up hope. I hear she came from the Orient, a lovely girl.”

“My wife is not dead. She is right there in front of my eyes, in the arms of a vile Lothario. Once I have rescued her, I shall cleanse her body in his blood.”

“Why did you reincarnate yourself, General Bey?” Setsura asked, speaking of a day from an era long ago. Takako squirmed in his arms. “Why leave Istanbul? In your pickled state, you never would have pined for her or any woman ever again. And you would never have visited this city.”

The two of them swayed as the bus navigated a corner, sweeping people off the road and onto the shoulder. Others watched on silently with glowing red eyes.

“Yasukuni Avenue. We’ll soon be to Yotsuya.” There was feeling in Setsura’s voice. “I’ve been driving the bus for a while now. This bus travels the streets of Demon City. Do you know what that means, General Bey?”

“Exactly. It will soon become a fortress for me and my wife. You can listen to us building it in hell.” The general leaned forward. Stopping him was the girl in Setsura’s arms. The vampire lord ground his teeth. “Put her down, you blackguard.”

“And if I say no?”

General Bey was too startled to answer. He hadn’t expected the

young man to resort to such measures. There was something different about him. No, Bey understood that it wasn't a matter of *difference* so much as this Setsura was the yin to the other's yang. Yet the incomprehensible image lingered in his brain, like a springtime haze slipping through his fingers.

Now it became a cold blade.

"What are you doing, General Bey?" Another shadow rose up behind him and castigated him. "Stop stalling. Kill Setsura. And kill the woman first. That's what the doctor ordered. You cannot confront Setsura until you do."

"The doctor—Mephisto, you mean?" Setsura mused, "He's still sticking his oar in, is he?"

"Get him!" Kikiou shrieked again, loud enough to kick up a small gale.

The general hesitated. He had at least recognized the perverse impulse buried deep within his brain—the murderous desires directed toward the woman in Setsura's arms. Kikiou hadn't told him about all the mind-controlling instructions Mephisto had instilled in him.

After being brought here from Princess's world, all he knew was that Takako would attack Setsura. Only if she failed would he step forth. And he had obediently gone along. Needless to say, the Demon Physician had blocked the willful expression of his overweening pride.

Kikiou had purposely revealed the existence of the mind control

because Mephisto had said that by doing so it would take immediate effect. To be sure, the general had eagerly gone along for the ride. He'd agreed to hunt down Setsura with Takako at his side. And now, with the prey within his grasp, the general seized upon the awful truth.

"What have you done to me!" The vampire's cry erupted out of the depths of the night.

Kikiou didn't understand such emotions. "What the hell is the matter with you? Are you enjoying this bus ride? What a bother. Allow me to—"

What the great warlock meant to say—"destroy Setsura" or "kill Takako"—he didn't get to finish the sentence.

The way General Bey whirled around, he must have suspected the latter. His right hand slashed past Kikiou's neck. A gushing sound like a whale clearing its blow hole. The great warlock threw his head back—there was no time to deploy his demon *qi*—and clasped his hand to his neck. Blue blood spat between his fingers.

"What are you doing, General Bey!"

Kikiou swayed, breathing curses and spitting with malice, as the vampire bore down on him. A split-second before the second strike struck home, a large pair of wings beat against the air above his head.

Sweeping hands and claws batted away the blue liquid pouring down from above. "Who planned on it all happening this way?" Yakou's question vanished into the pitch-black sky. "The bloke

really rubs me the wrong way, but right now I have no choice but to save him. Hang in there, Setsura, if you can!”

When the human silhouettes carved out against the backdrop of the stars had dwindled to the size of the stars themselves, General Bey turned back to his foe. Nobody was there to interfere, and the morning was hours away.

“Put down my wife,” he growled.

“Or else what?” Setsura answered in the voice of the night. “To kill me, you must kill Kanan-san. Can you do it?”

“Put down my wife,” he repeated, though he had no way of knowing whether that would turn the situation to his benefit.

Setsura turned his gaze to the buildings on either side of them. “Yotsuya. The station should soon come into view.”

In that instant, the general sprang into the air.

Miyako and the doll girl silently backed away from Ryuuki’s burning body. Miyako stretched out her right hand. A black hole opened up in her palm. She was a battle cyborg who could take a division of air, sea or land forces all by herself.

On the verge of being incorporated into the SDF Special Forces, the Human Rights Commission wanted to know what in the world this business was of turning women into robots, and banished the cyborg corps. That was when she settled down in Shinjuku with the kids.

A silver knob jutted out from the hole. A phonon maser. Just as

the ultrasonic sound waves began to pummel Ryuuki's head, Miyako fell over. Not because of the radiation, but due to a strange paralysis in the metabolic regulators induced by an unknown source of energy.

Fire eating down to his marrow, General Ryuuki's demon *qi* was yet alive and well. The doll girl stood there, as if protecting the gasping female cyborg. Could even this creation of Galeen Nuvenberg withstand Ryuuki's demon *qi*?

The air shook. Excited electrons transitioned to higher energy levels, awaiting the photon-induced discharge.

The invisible stream of energy diverted inches in front of the doll girl and dove into the ground. The burning man stopped. New skin regenerated beneath the charred flesh and was consumed again by the jellied gasoline.

"Tonbeau-sama?" exclaimed the amazed doll girl, as the witch waded through the deadly blue mist, her being brimming with dignity.

"It's about time you minded your manners," snipped Tonbeau Nuvenberg, not detecting the usual sardonic edge in the doll girl's 'sama.' She stood next to the doll girl and looked down at Miyako. "Collect her and get her out of here. And then come back for me. I'm not taking all this on my own shoulders, I assure you."

"Ah—yes." The doll girl took hold of Miyako's arm and led her out of the vacant lot.

Tonbeau watched them leave and said to Ryuuki, "Seeing how you're letting us walk out of here, I guess you do have some speck of

chivalry left in you. Hey, how about you and me go into business together? Well, you don't much look in the mood for conversation. But listen, okay? Here's what I'm thinking—even in Demon City, you gotta have a few screws loose to be happy getting chomped on by a vamp. So you pick out a target, suck some blood, the poor victim goes clamoring for justice and revenge, and that's when the world's best vampire hunter—none other than me, Tonbeau Nuvenberg—comes calling. Look, we can just keep killing you over and over, right? And do it pretty painlessly to boot. So, how about it? Shall we seal the deal and make ourselves some money?"

Something flew out in front of her eyes and blew her backwards a dozen feet. "Whoa!" She rolled like a barrel, but quickly popped back to her feet. "Nice one, bud!" she said, rolling up her sleeves. "You may be a four-thousand-year-old vampire from China, but don't go looking down your nose at the Czech Republic's second greatest witch."

She smacked her plump, mitt-like hands together. Her sausage-sized lips mumbled a series of spells—

"Princess—" said the roaring flames.

"Huh?" Tonbeau craned her ears.

"Princess—where are you?"

Ryuuki trudged forward. Faced with the sheer awfulness of the scene, the fat witch forgot her incantations and quickly retreated.

Several minutes later, having set Miyako down at a safe remove, the doll girl ran back to the vacant lot as fast as she could. When she

arrived, she saw an oily napalm inferno crawling along the ground, and inside it the dancing bands of radiation.

The Czech Republic's second greatest witch looked on blankly and mumbled, "The horror, the horror."

General Bey realized as he jumped that Setsura had simultaneously vaulted over his head. What stayed the devil wire from leaving his hand was knowing that Takako was still in his arms.

What impressed him all the more was that Setsura had accomplished such a powerful jump while hauling along two severed heads.

He threw the wires instead at Setsura's feet. They snaked along beneath him, then rose like a cobra and slithered into the cuffs of his slacks, opening up tiny slits and wrapping around his legs, torso and neck. With a single jerk of his hand, the general could slice and dice Setsura like a deli ham.

And so he yanked.

Simultaneously, Setsura raised his free hand and rose up on his toes like a dancer doing the Bolero. The only thing missing from the image was a red rose clasped between his lips.

The general stared in disbelief. Without encountering any resistance, the wires reeled back to him. Striking that pose, Setsura managed to move his body in a manner that rendered them useless. And he couldn't understand how or why.

Attacks made with devil wires could assume many forms. Setsura had worked out many defenses using his threads and his own body

and various other available tools, the same as with General Bey's assault.

But then why didn't he get off the bus? Even racing along at seventy, he could have lashed his devil wires to a passing building and swung off like Tarzan or like a literal high-wire artist climbed out of danger. With Takako in his arms, General Bey would be powerless to do anything but watch.

The bus ran through the darkness of Yasukuni Avenue. Yotsuya Station was just ahead.

"Are you sure you want to be here?" Setsura said from the back of the bus. Red lines entwined the general's neck and torso. Blood scattered like red rain. "There's no budging you?" he said, reversing the severed wires. Again with the cryptic observations. "Or will you be changing rides? Or shall we?"

Setsura was driving the bus with his devil wires. The titanium threads issuing forth from his fists had disengaged the autopilot and taken over the steering wheel and the brakes. He was the driver on this night shift bus.

This bus normally ran on Yasukuni Avenue from the old SDF garrison and Honmuracho in Ichigaya to Shinjuku, turning toward Ichigaya Daimachi and Yochomachi at Akebono Bridge. But now from the far end of Yasukuni Avenue, it headed in the opposite direction on Shinjuku Avenue toward Yotsuya.

Something must be waiting there.

The general waved his left hand. A simple gesture, but Setsura

knew that he'd severed the wires controlling the bus. General Bey noticed something also.

"Don't care for the bus either? It's time for us to make a transfer too."

What Setsura did next beggared belief. He leaned over and laid Takako down at his feet. The king had just sacrificed his queen—for nothing. On the narrow roof of the bus that left him little room to maneuver, giving away the advantage to an opponent like General Bey who could hurl Setsura's moves right back at him and heal any wound at once had surely lowered his odds of prevailing to close to nil.

Setsura narrowed his eyes. The outlines of the familiar station building came into view. The old JR Yotsuya Station.

"Bring it on, General Bey," he said, and jumped forward.

General Bey came running. Bands of light brightly wove through heaven and earth. Then separated as the two returned to their positions. Setsura stood at the front of the bus, the station behind him, while the general held the rear.

Holding Takako in his arms, the vampire lord roared with laughter. A victory cry of conquest and defeat that shook the darkness. A song of love and blood and pain.

"You strung your wires around my neck," said the general, glaring at Setsura. "As did I around yours. If we both pull together, both will fall. But will yours regenerate?"

Setsura didn't answer. He stood there mutely, like the night had

carved itself into human form.

"And wrapped them around Takako's neck too. Once you are dead, I will slay her as well. Then hide myself in this city. I have no other choice. From this night hence, this city will become the metropolis of the dead, Setsura. The cemetery surrounding Takako's gravestone. And one day, I shall leave this place for the outside world. Hoh, I do not recall possessing such resolve at the height of my battles with the Turks. Even in death, a woman's power is a terrifying thing. I will offer up the world in remembrance of Takako's soul. Hold back your horses, Princess, at least until I have finished. No, you should have no objections. I am only fulfilling your dreams!"

"This is Demon City," Setsura finally said. The wind blew his black hair across his crystalline cheeks and forehead. "Whether people or demons, we drive on the left in Japan. General, one day we'll meet again in hell."

Setsura leaned to Bey's right. Not to avoid an oncoming attack. Keeping his body in a straight line, he tipped almost to the horizontal. Not grasping this strategy, General Bey was about to yank on his deadly wires.

His body went rigid.

With Setsura leaning out of the way, the view down the long canyon of the city street to the station and the soaring steeple was now unobstructed. This particular view could only be seen approaching Yotsuya Station along Shinjuku Avenue and driving on the left-hand side of the road.

The cross high atop the steeple of St. Ignatius Church, adjacent to Sophia Catholic University. When had it dawned on him—Setsura Aki, citizen of Demon City—to make of it a spear through a demon's heart?

The cross glowed with a fierce white light. The general's eyes sparkled as the cross's phosphorescent light burned through his corneas and retinas, down the optic nerve, and out the back of his head.

"Takako—my wife!" His cries themselves incandesced into shafts of light that poured from his mouth, from his nose, from his ears. A moment later, his head flew from his shoulders into the air. Scattering shards of light like a disco ball, the head fell away into the darkness.

The headless torso stood there defiantly as Setsura scooted in and swept Takako up in his arms. The general's body crumbled down to his feet. The wind swept the gray dust into the sky, along with the ash and embers of his clothing.

Vampires feared the cross, but destroying them required a stake through the heart or a beheading—to that extent, the legends were correct. The cross shining in the night instilled terror in General Bey's heart, and for a moment that terror nullified the regenerative powers Princess had bestowed on him. And before it could resume its normal functioning, Setsura Aki's devil wires had raced through the darkness.

That was the final ace Setsura had up his sleeve, and he bet the house on intervening in the split-second those regenerative powers were held in abeyance.

And now the greatest general of the Middle Ages was gone. Another phoenix had plummeted to earth in Demon City.

Setsura held the girl in his arms and looked down the street at the glimmering point of light. A thousand tragedies played out every day in Demon City Shinjuku, and now the curtains drew closed on but one more.

He cast a doleful glance down at the two heads swaying against his chest. “Let’s go,” he said.

The darkness closed around the comely countenance—sans anger, sans sadness, and far from joy.

Part Fourteen: Lightning from Heaven

Chapter One

It was past eleven at night by the time they arrived back in Takada no Baba. Tonbeau Nuvenberg was gasping for breath. They hadn't been able to hail a taxi, so had trudged all the way back from the scene of their death match in Ichigayadai.

She plopped herself down in a chair in the living room. "What a night! I am beat! And with absolutely nothing to show for it! So much ado about nothing."

The way she pounded on the table, that weariness didn't seem much in evidence to the doll girl, who looked in surprise at her mistress's sister and said, "If you have that much vigor left, perhaps you could tend to the raven? It looks quite serious."

"I almost got myself killed, you know. My God. An old woman like me out on a night like this. I got into this line of work so I wouldn't have to do all this manual labor, dammit. I'm pouring myself a stiff drink and going to bed."

She got to her feet with a *thump*. Behind her a tired voice asked, "Ah, you're back." Mayor Kajiwara emerged from the back of the narrow hallway.

"Goodness gracious, you're up already?" Tonbeau rubbed her hands together and speedily lent him a shoulder to lean on.

Unfurling the wings of the raven lying on its back on the floor, the doll girl soon understood the reason for Tonbeau's sudden burst

of charity.

“I was wondering when I could collect on my reward, you know, for saving you. C’mon, don’t think I did it out of the kindness of my heart.”

“Of course. You will be justly compensated, a gift for which you will thank me for the rest of your life.”

“What? Are you trying to play me, Mister?”

“Leave Shinjuku before tomorrow noon. That is my gift.”

“What the hell kind of a gift is that!”

The mayor raised his right hand and made a circling motion with his index finger.

“Are you saying I’m crazy?”

“No, the prime minister and the American president. Right now, in geostationary orbit twenty-two-thousand miles above us, a nuclear missile is drawing its crosshairs on Shinjuku.”

“What?”

“The zero hour is noon, Japan standard time.”

“W-w-what?”

“Are you certain?” the doll girl calmly inquired.

“Unfortunately, yes. I was hoping that the egg could somehow avert it. I hope you don’t mind, but while you were out I made use of your phone and called Prime Minister Kongodai. I was told he was at an undisclosed location. I tried contacting the Defense Agency

Director with the same results. Trying to bluff that egg was a mistake. Its decision of when to dream its dreams is subtle. Director Yamase ending up in the hospital counts as some sort of payback."

"Don't make me laugh. That doesn't count as anything in my book. What are you going to do about it? Why didn't you tell me this when you asked for my help?"

Tonbeau was mad enough to spit. When they'd first met and Kajiwara asked for her assistance, he said to come looking for him if he wasn't back by the next morning. He identified the hospital as the place to start, so he must have anticipated the effects of the egg.

"Where's the prime minister? Negotiate with him! Negotiate!"

"That has been my intent all along. In the meantime I have instructed the ward to issue shelter and evacuation orders. You should get out of here, too. First, if you don't, the likelihood of being fried to a crisp is strong. Second, I strongly suspect your landline is bugged."

"By the Defense Agency?"

"And probably the NSA."

"Why didn't you inform the public earlier? You knew about this missile business before you sallied off to the Defense Agency, didn't you?"

"Hard to say now."

"Another irresponsible political hack." Tonbeau banged her hands on the table.

Kajiwara added nothing more, only pressed his hands against the sides of his head. The fat witch sighed and exchanged a glance with the pretty doll girl, and then started with an audible gasp.

Tonbeau backpedaled as ooze spilled out between Kajiwara's fingers. She comprehended its true nature in a flash. Her disagreeable disposition notwithstanding, she wasn't the Czech Republic's second-greatest witch for nothing.

"That's a dream! The nightmare that put the old man into a trance at the Defense Agency. Oh, it must have been a bad one."

"But why now? The mayor isn't asleep."

"It's a reaction to this house and to me. Get back. Touch him and we'd get sucked into the same nightmare, despite ourselves."

The "dream" looked like cans of paint spilling onto the center of the table. Something crawled along the surface. Familiar shapes twisted through the amalgam of chaotic colors. And what they would reveal when the canvas cleared—

The table burst into flame. The dazzling column of light washed the expressions from the faces of the fat witch and the doll girl. The reverberations shook their bodies. The cloud rising up from the liquid revealed its terrible true colors.

"That is—"

"—a nuclear explosion."

The death of the world pounded against their eardrums. The scene changed. Spreading out on the table was the charred and

ruined remains of the city. A black cloud blanketed the sky. Lava coursed around the shattered, shapeless buildings. The only thing ruling this world was the scorching heat.

And changed again.

The falling snow cast off blue-white beams, as if wrapping the tableau in bows of intense radiation. Beneath the tumbling ash, black ghosts trudged down unknown paths, clothed in rags, faces streaked with soot, eyes vacant.

The clouds of nuclear radiation veiled the ground, stole away the heat, cast down the brilliant snow and plunged the world into nuclear winter.

The doll girl said, “A likely scenario.”

Tonbeau Nuvenberg nodded. “Seeing this, a person of normal sensibilities would go mad, even envying the dead. What we are seeing is only a pale shadow of the original.”

“It’s fading,” the doll girl said.

The dreamworld dimmed, lost its shape and contours, and was drawing back between Kajiwara’s fingers when Tonbeau mumbled something.

The two looked at the scratched surface of the wooden table. Kajiwara groaned and lifted his head. He blinked. “You saw it too?”

“Relax,” Tonbeau said confidently. “See something like that more than once and it’d plague you for the rest of your life. You’ll sleep soundly after tonight. I’m not so sure about the Defense

Agency Director and his ilk."

"I'll pack your suitcase," said the doll girl, starting for the hallway.

"Wait," said Tonbeau. She turned back to Kajiwara. "When did you inform the ward?"

"About twenty minutes ago."

"I'm going to hide in the basement. You've got guests."

Kajiwara turned his surprised gaze toward the window, but saw only gloomy darkness beyond the glass.

"Five or so. Dammit, I so do not look forward to getting involved in another unprofitable brawl."

"I shall go greet them," the doll girl said coolly. "In the meantime, Tonbeau-sama, the raven needs looking after. I shall make arrangements for your escape, should things turn in that direction."

"I'll leave that up to you. It's looking like the sooner we get out of here the better."

The doll girl went outside three minutes later. As soon as she left, she felt a strange change. The enemy had closed in on them in those three minutes, but something else had happened too.

Her blue eyes peered through the dark. Her small lips smiled. Standing on the blood-soaked street, scanning his surroundings, was the handsome visage of none other than Setsura Aki. He was holding a girl in his arms, and—

"Grandma!" the doll girl wailed in a wretched voice that human

ears rarely heard. Not “mistress,” but “grandma.”

She clung to Galeen Nuvenberg’s head, hanging from his waist, and called out to her again and again. Setsura impassively looked down at her. Finally he gently nudged her shoulders.

“Your grandmother died saving my life.”

“I thought as much. Such a person would not throw away her life on a personal whim,” she said plainly. She touched her cheeks. “But of course. Tears do not flow.” Setsura didn’t know how to respond to that. She added, “Please do not misunderstand. I am capable of crying. However, in this case only—on the occasion of Grandma’s death—am I not allowed to weep. That is how she made me. For her alone I was not to mourn. And so I do not.”

“She was a good person,” Setsura said softly. An expression that could even be called human shadowed the unearthly beauty of his face.

The doll girl fixed her gaze on the street Setsura had come down and saw several bodies lying on the ground. “And them?”

“They were spying on your house. I asked them why and they attacked me. They weren’t carrying IDs, but from the way they moved, they’re company men. Military would be my guess. And in Japan—”

“The SDF.”

“What did they come here for? Well, we should probably ask them directly.”

“I agree.”

The two walked back to the house. After ten steps, one of the shadows stood and tottered after them.

The man was a ranger in the Ground Self-Defense Forces. He’d been ordered to go to Nuvenberg’s house and take Mayor Kajiwara into custody. If that wasn’t possible, then he was to kill him. He had on his belt enough plastic explosives to bring down a three-story house.

The pain from the invisible knives pressing against his vital organs was enough to make him yield to the questioning, after which he fainted.

Weeping filled the Nuvenberg household, not ceasing even during the man’s questioning. In the adjacent room, her round face wet with tears, Tonbeau Nuvenberg cradled her sister’s head and cried out loud lamentations.

After the ranger confessed everything he was going to, Kajiwara caught Setsura up to speed on the situation. Not looking at his watch, Setsura said breezily, “It’s midnight. That gives us twelve hours.”

“Exactly. I’ll call an emergency session of the city council. Sorry to have to ask, but I could use an escort to the ward government building.”

“No problem. But perhaps the evacuation would best begin at dawn. There are plenty of peaches along the main thoroughfares, but the back streets are still ruled by the vampires.”

“I don’t suppose that even the impending strike of a nuclear missile will convince them to behave otherwise?”

“Probably not. Then there’s the question of whether a missile would do the intended job on them.”

Kajiwara gaped a bit at that. “It is as he says,” the doll girl added. “It may be effective so long as they are completely vaporized. But scalding and radiating them alone will not destroy the vampires. The accursed blood keeps them alive. Modern military technology will not help in this regard.”

“If only Prime Minister Kongodai and the American president would understand that.” Kajiwara sighed and leaned back in his chair. His face was pale and his breaths shallow. The echoes of the dream were still with him.

The telephone rang. The doll girl went to answer it. “It’s from the ward,” she said to Kajiwara.

He held up a reassuring hand to Setsura and left the room. When he returned ten minutes later, the expression on his face was even graver.

“What’s up?” Setsura asked, with a concerned look of his own.

“All the gates to the outside world have been shut and sealed. The reason given is the outbreak of a contagion of unknown origins.”

“There’s at least method to their madness,” Setsura said lightly, and then swore to himself. Kajiwara glared at him.

“Do they intend to destroy all of Shinjuku?” the doll girl wondered aloud.

“I called the prime minister at his home, but nobody is saying a thing. I have the feeling the quarantine will continue until dawn.”

“Until then, the citizens of the ward can get ready to move and take shelter a safe distance from the strike zone. How possible is that?”

Kajiwara shook his head in response to Setsura’s question. “Sunrise is at five o’clock. Seven hours isn’t enough time.”

“Then there’s no assurance that the quarantine will be lifted at dawn. The evacuation order should probably be belayed. It would only cause chaos.”

“I’ll tell the ward to hold off for the time being. But I do need to get back.”

Kajiwara stood up. He was still in pajamas. His upper body swayed a bit.

“What’s the government up to?” Setsura Aki leaned back in his chair. “The prime minister is not an innocent citizen of this city. That Princess could suck his blood for all I care.”

Rubbing his head, Kajiwara’s hand suddenly stopped.

“What?”

“Sucking blood or having it sucked—it’s hard to believe, but—” His strained voice soon found new life. “I can’t dismiss the possibility. The prime minister must have met her.”

“Meaning what?” Setsura leaned forward. Even his nonchalance had its limits when it came to the destruction of Demon City.

“Something like this—”

Kajiwara described what had happened the night of the destruction of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex. His information wasn’t originally first-hand, but he’d later been filled in by the Cabinet Secretary. A standoff between Princess and the outside world had apparently led to the destruction of the Complex. Prime Minister Kongodai was there when it happened, and the shock had put him in the hospital.

As could be expected, no other emotion clouded Setsura’s face. “Princess lets an enemy head of state out of her clutches, and he’s confined to his bed with emotional exhaustion—”

He sunk back into silence. It was hard to tell what thoughts were going through his mind. For a while, the near-feral weeping filled the house.

“So, what do you propose? Go back there? Anybody have any better ideas?”

“There?” The doll girl furrowed her brows with a clicking sound. “The world of the Demon Princess?”

“Yeah,” said Setsura, stifling a yawn.

Chapter Two

"Princess must be furious."

"That's one way of putting it." Yakou cast down his eyes and bowed in the direction of Mephisto's back.

They were in the laboratory Kikiou had given to Mephisto. What was the good doctor up to—who would otherwise be slaving away in the remains of the old ward government building? Despite his familiarity with the sciences of the occult, not even Yakou could begin to guess.

He could almost believe that this doctor could create a human being out of a test tube filled with tap water. He'd handed over Kikiou's wrecked frame as soon as he'd returned, but the old warlock was nowhere to be seen.

"If you find us so unreliable, one way or the other, you must intend to take up the task yourself."

"Oh?" Mephisto held the flask up even with his eyes. "Demon City is awash with blood. Shinjuku may have gotten a bit too laid-back of late. The goal, then, is to take possession of Takako Kanan and thus torment Setsura?"

"At this juncture, she lives for nothing else."

"And Setsura is no less obsessed, it seems. Somebody will have to choose."

Mephisto slowly turned around. Yakou sensed his whole body stiffening, something he'd never experienced before. He looked into Mephisto's eyes. By the time he sensed Mephisto looking into his, the face of the white doctor was right there in front of him.

"I have accepted a commission from Setsura, to return you to your normal self."

A fragrant aroma drifted on Mephisto's breath. His voice formed a delicate, controlling chord that echoed down to the stem of his brain.

"At this late hour, what—" Yakou started to retreat and stopped. Mephisto's face came so close their noses almost touched. "What do you intend to do?" Yakou managed to squelch his rising voice. *When had he become a prisoner of the white doctor?*

"Setsura entrusted me with the drug necessary for your treatment."

"Why now?" squeaked Yakou, despite himself.

"It has taken time to prepare the elixir. Here it is." He held up the test tube, half-filled with a clear liquid. "Drink this and you will fulfill Setsura's wishes. Though not yours right now."

"You're asking for my opinion? Doctor Mephisto turning down a commission from Setsura Aki—"

"There is no need for me to turn down anything. I am not the man I am or appear to be. He forgets that, and did not recompense me as expected. In any case, isn't listening to your opinion on the matter the natural thing to do in a situation like this?"

“I don’t know. But if I say I do not want to return to how I was, will you allow Setsura’s request to go unfulfilled?”

“We can only try and see how things turn out.”

Yakou fell silent. He knew that Mephisto had become a vampire. Even without looking into those eyes, the Demon Physician now was so much more alluring and dangerous.

“Let’s keep it between ourselves, but he asked that I cure Takako Kanan as well.”

“He did what?” Yakou shuddered. A human whose blood was taken would remain a vampire as long as the sire lived. To want to go back under any other conditions was a joke. But none of them had ever faced off against Mephisto.

Yakou said, “Can you really do it?”

“Well.”

“And why would you tell me about it?”

“Annoying Setsura counts for one reason. And the other—”

“The other?”

Dark wings began to spread their shadows across his mind. Be baptized a second time in the endless cold of that black nothingness and he would never emerge again. *I must go*, he prayed somewhere in his thoughts.

Mephisto’s face again drew close. The tips of their noses touched. “Setsura wanted me to save you. That’s the reason.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I cannot allow a man such as you to occupy the thoughts of Setsura Aki for more than a moment.”

Yakou had no response to that. Their two shadows fell across the floor. Only the distance between their faces maintained a strange integrity, painting a gap in light and dark on the floor.

“So you will keep what I just said to you stored away in your heart?”

“Of course. If I told Princess or Kikiou, what would you do?”

“I suppose you could. And this as well?”

The shadows overlapped. The one trembled, then grew compliant. When they parted, Yakou’s eyes were closed.

“You must worry about it on your own—whatever goes on between Princess and myself. Remember this—before Princess can make Setsura her victim, I will cure Takako Kanan. That is something you can never disclose.”

“You’re a strange man, Doctor Mephisto,” said Yakou, unconsciously brushing his fingers against his lips. A veil was falling over his eyes. He took two, three steps backward, then the energy went out of his limbs. “What do you intend to do with Kikiou?”

“I will fix him. However, Princess asks that I take my time doing so.”

“That is cruel. Wasn’t Princess the one who brought Setsura back

to life in the first place?" Despite the anger in his words, a cold smile rose to his face. Not so much as Princess's underling, but because he and Kikiou had been at loggerheads from the start.

The smile was still on Yakou's face when he suddenly stiffened. "She's calling," Mephisto said.

A distant gong sounded through the sky. And again. Setsura Aki stood in front of the wall at the west entrance of Chuo Park. The three shadows behind him were as still as the summer night.

"It's moved, obviously."

Setsura reeled the invisible titanium threads back into his right hand. Five minutes before, having escorted Kajiwara to the ward government offices, he'd raced here and sent his devil wire over the wall to confirm the entrance to Princess's lair near the library.

He'd felt no response. The devil wires communicated nothing more than a depression in the ground covered by the infinite mass of the earth. Like the ruins of the Keio University Hospital where Mephisto had previously stolen into Princess's world, it had shifted to another location. According to Mephisto, there should be traces of the move left behind.

The doubts smoldering in his chest burst into flame. What did their world consist of exactly? Based on something Kikiou had said when the wall of water swept through the mausoleum beneath the lake, that question had caught Yakou's attention as well. Were he not Princess's prisoner, Setsura may have even been able to checkmate her forces.

But right now, a more pressing matter was on his mind. “It’s awfully quiet,” he said.

“Yes, it is. Quite unbelievable for two o’clock. So many things have happened since those people arrived, too many to count.”

The doll girl’s answer brought to mind haunting emotions. Tonbeau Nuvenberg wept with heartrending sorrow. “My big sister is dead! And only her head remains!”

Perhaps horrified by the hoarse voice, the small gremlins nearby turned tail and scooted off into the darkness.

Unperturbed, Setsura said, “As things stand now, the mayor has rescinded the evacuation order. The battle ahead of us turns on two deadlines, dawn and noon.”

“The gates to the outside world will be opened, won’t they?”

“If not, there’ll be no announcement. The rest depends on the mayor’s skills.”

“The mayor is putting his faith in Setsura Aki.”

“My only concern right now is Aki Senbei. Getting gobbled down by monsters is one thing. But having it vaporized so dispassionately by a nuclear missile would give me no good reason to keep on living in Shinjuku.”

“I understand completely.”

“Thank you.” Setsura turned to the wailing Tonbeau and said soothingly, “Your big sister would take solace in seeing such sorrow from you.”

Tonbeau sniffled and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. “I finally make it to Japan to earn a little money, and this! What do I do now? When my sister and I joined forces, any city in the world was our oyster. Those Witch Association loans? Vatican City debts? A piece of cake! Oh!”

And she resumed wailing.

“I give up,” said the doll girl.

“She does say exactly what’s on her mind,” an impressed Setsura said, who had his own standards for evaluating a human’s worth.

“I persuaded her to join us, but when push comes to shove, her usefulness in this present state of mind is questionable. I’m sorry.”

“I’m happy enough that she chose to come with,” Setsura said with a smile that lit up the darkness. “I’m grateful to you, too.”

“You needn’t be.” The doll girl lowered her eyes. Her cherubic cheeks grew a tad redder than usual. “You needn’t,” she said again, and then she appeared to steel herself and looked up. “And her?”

Her eyes focused on the third shadow standing beside Tonbeau. The pale Takako Kanan glowed like a will-o’-wisp in the moonlight. She wasn’t wearing her shroud. They’d stopped at an all-night market near the ward government building and bought her a moss green and light-brown plaid blouse and jeans.

Though this more normal appearance brought out something of the human in her, the vibe she engendered in any case was more that of the grave. Setsura had bound her with his devil wires. The look she gave him in turn was filled with curses and naked animosity. Her

breath hummed from between the fangs protruding from her lips.

What did Setsura have in mind for this girl, hardly different from any other blood-lusting demon? He had already faced death on several occasions to avoid bringing her to a place like this.

He answered breezily, “We’ve no other choice but to play the cards we’ve been dealt.”

“People are coming.” The doll girl looked down the Koshu Highway behind Setsura. A number of shadows were trudging along the moonlit, rain-dampened sidewalks as if wading through high water. Red points of light glowed on their faces. Their nature needed no other explanation.

Setsura glanced briefly in that direction, but didn’t move. The brave little maiden started forward, intending to make this fight hers as well.

“Stay there.”

“But—”

“Something odd is going on. Let’s observe first.”

He was not a man to stand down from a game of chicken. But the vampires approached and despite noticing him there, passed on by in an obviously agitated manner.

Following behind them, the doll girl said, “There are several more over there too, just wandering about. What is going on?”

“The vampires have sensed something waiting in the wings,” Setsura said, checking out Takako. “Kanan-san is looking up at the

sky. She must have noticed as well."

"The missile?"

"Hard to imagine what else."

"In which case, then tomorrow—"

"I can't say. All we can do is our best and let the chips fall where they may." Setsura turned to Takako, standing there stock still. He said in an admonishing voice, "Kanan-san, you're the only one with a direct line to that whack job. She could be looking through your eyes at me right now. Hey, Princess, there's something I need to talk to you about. Listen up. Right now, Shinjuku is in a shitload of trouble. Looks like you're the only one who can do something about it. To keep it short and simple—"

He summed up the situation in less than three minutes.

"If you want to speak through Kanan-san, that's fine too. A few pointers would be nice. Your world won't exactly escape unscathed."

This might well be the most pressing and earnest appeal Setsura had made in his life, even since the birth of Shinjuku. And yet Setsura's voice resembled more a jocular *bon vivant* awakened in the springtime of his youth.

Despite something being slightly out of sync somewhere, those who knew what was going on knew there could be no more urgent appeal. He repeated it three more times.

The moon hid behind a cloud. The asphalt grieved the passing of

its shadow and rejoiced at its reappearance. The creatures of the night moved silently by.

"Enough already, pretty boy," Tonbeau Nuvenberg called out on the fourth go-around. Her sorrow at the lost profit possibilities with her sister in this foreign land had apparently exhausted itself. "Hard to believe that girl's connected with another vampire. Besides, why would any of them be interested in this nuclear missile stuff? The guy vamps are too busy lusting after girl blood and the girls are all obsessed with stalking the guys. Although—"

Here the doll girl caught her breath and her features hardened.

"When it comes to a good-looking guy like you, yeah, she'd show herself in exchange for the blood in your body. You really are a fine piece of work. Even the homunculi I make can't hold a candle to the likes of you."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Setsura said with a slight nod.

From some indistinct direction came the sound of a chariot. Setsura oriented himself to its approach—from the south, from a corner of the Koshu Highway.

On the right was Shinjuku's Chuo Park and the trees of the DMZ. On the left, the Park Hyatt Hotel and the mountainous remains of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Complex.

The one sank into the darkness, the other shimmered with pale light like a silver plate. The four raised their heads, as if intoxicated by the gaze of the moon. The wind rustled through the branches of the trees.

Setsura brushed a strand of hair from his forehead. The pounding of hooves turned into two black horses pulling a red and black chariot. The red wheels identified it at once as from the Han Dynasty. The parted black curtains cocooning the top half of the nine-foot square carriage suggested that the entire chariot was patterned after a *shisha* or "covered wagon" of the period, also known as a *fusha* or "canopied carriage." Since the Han Dynasty, it'd been used to transport women and children out of view of common eyes.

The curtains were covered with gold embroidered tigers and dragons. The horse and chariot came to a flamboyant halt beside the four. Tonbeau Nuvenberg screeched at the exquisite sight and jumped backwards.

The pair of otherworldly creatures continued to paw the ground. Standing on the coachman's perch, reins and a whip in her hands, was none other than the Demon Princess herself.

She looked down at Setsura. "At last the day has come when you have beckoned me." Her words were filled with fire and ice. "I know what you want. And you know what you have to do to get what you want."

Chapter Three

"*And*—?!" the doll girl exclaimed with surprise.

Setsura only hiked up his eyebrows. Which of Princess's declarations he was reacting to and how was anybody's guess.

"I cast my spell on the ruler of this country. If only for a short while, I thought he might be an interesting toy to play with. I suppose I could add stopping the firing of that nuclear missile to the list. However, Setsura, don't think you can relax. I can return to any place I have ever been at any time. What becomes of you and this city means nothing to me. As far as Kikiou and I are concerned, wiping the place clean once and for all would probably be the most refreshing course of action. So, how will you reward us for saving you? What you are prepared to pay, Setsura?"

Her voice ceased. The wind roared at their backs. Black clouds covered the moon and the wind tore them apart, as if the heavens and earth too awaited the answer. The world stood poised at the crossroads of light and dark.

"What do you want?" Setsura asked, as if ordering dinner.

Princess cracked the whip against the side of the carriage. "Are you making fun of me?" she growled. She said, managing to control her rage, "What about your life?"

"Well, that is a head-scratcher," said Setsura, as the doll girl seized the sleeve of his coat.

“Hoh. The cute little girl has such a serious look on her face. Relax. I don’t want his life. I’ve got plenty lives of my own already. But in exchange—”

She crouched down and leapt into the sky. Her white hand seized Setsura’s neck. Her red eyes flashed at his not a foot away from his face.

Setsura reflexively closed his eyes.

“Oh, he’s a quick one. But if you don’t open your eyes, neither will I. The ruler of this country is called Kongodai. In any case, controlling him requires these eyes. So what will you do?”

“What do you plan on doing with Setsura-san?”

Princess looked down. “Hmm. I wonder. Keep him penned up in my basement for the rest of his life? Turn him into a literal son of a bitch?”

“I would not permit such a thing!”

“I’m only hypothesizing. I have no desire to kill him, either. Killing alone isn’t much fun anymore. I have to parcel the hell out in small doses to gain any true satisfaction from it. In order to do that —” Princess didn’t finish the sentence. Instead she looked at Takako, standing there ramrod straight. “You can come too.”

“No!”

Princess glared at the little girl. She didn’t retreat an inch. Her clear blue eyes stared back defiantly into the fires of hell.

Setsura patted her on the head. “I will accompany her.”

“You’ve resolved yourself?” Princess looked away and smiled. The doll girl wavered a bit, clinging to Setsura’s side as if to maintain her balance.

“However, there is one thing I’d like to ask you.”

“What is that?”

“Will you be taking Takako-san and me to your kingdom?”

“Exactly.” Princess nodded. “I considered making you a prisoner of my eyes, but not for now. I fancy instead a brief stroll down a dangerous path. All the instruments have been arranged. All manner of things unimaginably cruel and sordid. Items even I would hesitate to use. Though there will be places appropriate for every one of them.”

Setsura said, “Now that you mention it, I have only been in the vicinity of the manor house.”

“This time you would be well advised to keep your eyes peeled. I shall serve as your personal guide.”

“And for that I thank you.”

The one shot through with infinite loathing, maledictions and menace, and the other, full of the carefree promise of spring. The indescribable mismatch of characteristics in this odd give-and-take revealed well the nature of the beasts involved.

“Then get on board.” The whip cracked and pointed at the covered chariot.

“Wait.” The doll girl said in a strained voice, “How do you intend

to fulfill your end of the promise?"

"Relax. If I had enough spare time on my hands, I could destroy and resurrect this city a hundred times over by noon tomorrow. I will keep my word."

"Well, there you have it. I guess we'll be going then," Setsura said to the doll girl, as if he was going out for a stroll and would be back presently.

Princess drew her brows. Even she had a hard time understanding him. The look in her eyes suggested at times that she thought him a bit off his rocker.

"Do you know what you are coming here for?" she asked him.

"You don't?" was the reply, as if surprised.

Princess didn't answer. She would have all the time in the world to torment Setsura later. This was not the place to launch into some strange debate.

"Sorry, but you're going to have to come with."

Setsura put an arm around Takako and ducked into the veiled canopy. With a smug look of satisfaction on her face, the Demon Princess cracked the whip. The creak of the wheels and the clomp of hooves filled the night. As the chariot vaulted over the sidewalk and whirled around, the doll girl jumped out of the way and with a dejected expression watched it speed away.

Along with the fat witch standing there uselessly like an oversized fireplug.

Setsura settled onto the soft seat at the back of the canopy. "Where are we going?" he asked the whip-wielding Princess.

"We are going where we are going."

"Your world—where is it exactly?"

"Do you think I would tell you?"

"Well, worth a try. Maybe you'd slip up and say."

Princess must be annoyed that Setsura didn't fear her in the least.

"Today—well, yesterday—I heard there was an earthquake around noon. Then there was this dimensional vortex that tossed me about. The one caused the other?"

She didn't answer. But Setsura didn't take that as a cue to stop talking. No reason to stop doing things his way at this juncture.

"Seeing as it was a *Shinjuku* earthquake, it must be cousin to the Devil Quake and its aftershocks. If the epicenter is close by, all sorts of repercussions are bound to result, such as personality transfers and mutations in the internal organs. It follows that your world must have been very near. But I think there'd be limits to the abnormal changes a Devil Quake could cause in a separate world. Aren't the mountains and the lake and the manor house on *this* side of reality?"

"Enough with the chatter."

Setsura couldn't see the look on her face. This time the beautiful vampiress was smiling, as if to say, *He's putting two and two together*.

"Sorry for saying such presumptuous things, but I'd like to see

you deliver on your promise first."

"Oh, you don't believe me?"

"Not so much, no."

"No beating around the bush for you," said Princess, baring her fangs. "Fine."

Now she turned around and smiled. A bewitching smile that would utterly disarm the strongest man. But utterly devoid of charm and guilelessness, the smile of a sadistic child about to vivisect a frog.

"But neither can I trust you. I can order around the prime minister and his ilk from my kingdom. We'll continue the conversation there."

"If you say so," Setsura said a bit peevishly. It wasn't clear if Princess picked up on it, but he wasn't eager to go to her kingdom.

All of a sudden, she wasn't there in his line of sight. The curtains of the canopy blocked his view. Perhaps she wished to disguise the entrance to her dwelling.

"Hey!" Setsura called out, cupping his hand around his mouth. "Don't be such a spoilsport."

The curtains soon lifted. "You have a point," Princess said. On this she was resolute. That she had destroyed her fair share of dynasties was no vain boast.

The chariot turned off the Koshu Highway and approached the south entrance of Shinjuku Station. Setsura looked at Takako on the

seat beside him. She was no longer burning with a murderous rage, and appeared as little more than a pale empty shell, devoid of life. But at least when her demonic powers slackened, some of her original character returned.

Setsura thought of the lively image she'd presented when they first met at his shop. Young, pretty, burning with curiosity about the legends of ancient China—though at the end of the day, an ordinary college coed—with no comprehension of how her own fate hung in the balance.

If nothing else, then he should save this girl alone.

The disinterested mien vanished from his face. Takako suddenly turned and leaned against him. He cradled her head against his chest. Her sad eyes looked into his. Then just as abruptly, she reared up. Her fangs flashed. Uncoiling her body like a spring, Takako lunged at Setsura's throat.

But Setsura had already gently pushed her aside and gotten up. There was no telling if the look on her face had even registered.

"You got some strange chaps out there, eh?" he said, but received no answer.

On the street in front of the south entrance was a seething black mass. A crowd of people with red eyes and fangs.

"Hold on to the railing!" the Demon Princess cried out.

Setsura grasped the horizontal pole as the chariot plowed through the middle of the throng. This was an act of gratuitous, reckless violence. As soon as they saw the chariot and recognized Princess's

true nature, the crowd had parted to the left and right, creating a path for her. Knowing this, or despite this, she plunged ahead.

Shouts and screams and gouts of blood. A woman slow to flee was run over, her back crushed and peeled by the heavy wheels. That also caved in the chest of a homeless man, the ribs puncturing his organs and sticking out like a porcupine's quills.

Half of the face of a salaryman standing there gaping at the gore disappeared when Princess cracked her whip at him. The whip parted the air again and took the head of a high-schooler off her shoulders, and split a janitor's chest in two.

"What are you doing?"

"Are you out of your mind?"

Princess's soaring, loud laughter overrode these cries of dismay. She urged the horses forward, and lashed out with the whip and threw back her head and laughed as if this was the most delightful thing in the world. The tyrants of the ancient world who tortured their subjects must have created scenes like this. Her face overflowed with joy. Her whole being sparkled.

She was intoxicated by the indiscriminate mayhem and violence, high on the smell of blood. The divinity of her countenance—her inherent comeliness as she cracked the whip—a vivid testament to the twinned opposites of beauty and brutality.

And then the brutal storm ceased.

Scattering anachronistic thunder behind it, the chariot of death turned onto Meiji Avenue and galloped full speed down the hill.

Prime Minister Kongodai hadn’t been sleeping well lately. After falling asleep, it wasn’t more than a few minutes until the pain and anguish began, and his own unearthly screams jolted him awake. When his doctors and wife tried to console his frenzied state of mind, he thrust them away with superhuman strength. Tranquilizers and sleeping pills had no effect.

When he eventually calmed down enough for the doctor to examine him, he would only mutter, eyes heavy and his features haggard, “That woman—those red eyes—”

The rest was gibberish incomprehensible even to him. His hollow-eyed state worsened with the decision to bomb Shinjuku. From somewhere within his iron will—fully prepared to vaporize its hundreds of thousands of people to prevent a vampire invasion of greater Tokyo—welled up a blood-red tide of voices calling out with cruel and accursed ire.

The nerves of the Japanese prime minister had sharpened to the point where he felt the ticking of every second.

At three o’clock in the morning, after a private conference with the ruling party secretary general at the official residence, he retired to his bedroom and emerged ten minutes later, telling his bodyguard that he would be going out undercover and in absolute secrecy.

His late-model Rolls Royce left the official residence at three thirty-seven in the morning. With that, the prime minister disappeared into the darkness of the city.

Setsura lazily observed the approaching lights. In the smoky orange glow, they resembled the eyes of some nocturnal monster. The fog swirled around them. Winter, spring, summer and fall, the fog never dissipated from this plot of land. Perhaps nothing in these precincts had ever been clearly seen.

The blood-sucking plants and insects that on any other night would be on them in a flash, now consisted of a few

discombobulated creatures lying in pieces around his feet. The rest must be in their nests fretting about what the morrow would bring.

"He's here," said Princess. She was standing six feet or so in front of him. The chariot was a dozen yards behind them, hidden in the fog.

The sound of the engine died. The lights dimmed. The back door was flung open. A gray mass flew out. Just before striking the ground head first, the mass deftly rolled onto its shoulder, got its feet under it, and stood up.

As soon as a second jumped out, two silhouettes emerged from the front door, and another from the back door opposite emerged into the warm night air.

The last of the silhouettes said to the second, "Mr. Prime Minister, where are you going?"

But he had already run up to Princess. She grinned and said, "Thank you for coming."

Prime Minister Kongodai made no effort to hide his pale and frightened face. "Why—why did you call me?"

"Oh, for no reason of my own." She glanced at Setsura. "Pretty boy here insists on talking to you. Hoh, I did not expect you to extricate yourself alone, but with only four of your retainers? My, my, how the mighty have fallen in this modern world."

A critique only to be expected from a woman who had destroyed three dynasties.

The three of them were lit up in a spotlight. One of the bodyguards had turned on the car's headlamps.

"Who is this chick?" The speaker and his colleagues had their semi-autos and submachine guns out and aimed. "Keep your hands where we can see them. Resist and we'll shoot."

Despite the menace in the order, the behavior of the prime minister was strange enough that they moved very cautiously.

"Just the right number of players for this game," Princess said happily. "Listen to me, all of you. I'm only going to say this once. You are all coming to my kingdom. Up to the appointed hour, Setsura will search for the prime minister and his lackeys. Mine is not a calm and peaceful place. A wild and woolly world even I do not enter blithely. The prime minister's four armed retainers will be there, but the monsters will be after them too. Retrieve him before he is eaten alive and bring him back to me, and I will make your wishes come true. It is now a little before four in the morning. Including a generous margin for error, that gives this manhunter seven remaining hours to put all of his skills and abilities on display and save the city."

To be continued.

Original Volume V Afterword

This is the fifth volume of *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess*. Its completion follows upon yet another heroic struggle with Mr. T, my editor. When a series has gone on this long, we've learned each other's tells and can counter each move with one of our own.

"So, it's gonna end after X volumes then?" Mr. T says.

I strike an indecisive pose and answer, "You—you mean you want me to wrap it up right away?" And right away the question turns into a conversation—just as intended.

Originally planned for three volumes, *Yashakiden* will go beyond five, and is already well into volume six.

Mr. T's counterattack continues. "Ah, no. It's already five. The way things stand now, I can see it going six or seven."

"Naw. Make it six. The story's heading toward the conclusion. One more volume to wrap things up."

"Consider the current pacing. I thought things would pick up when you bumped off Shuuran, but it turns out she's not quite dead. And none of the major characters—"

"I'll start killing them off after this, pronto."

"Except that it's pretty clear who's gonna die and who's not, isn't it? Take a look at your fan letters—"

"Oh, c'mon. None of this deciding the fates of my characters

based on what the readers want. That's up to me, the writer."

"Heh, heh, heh," Mr. T laughs, this normally unassuming holder of a degree in political economics brimming with an unusual air of confidence.

And I know the reason. Several months before, he'd said to me with seeming reluctance, "This letter came the other day."

He held out the envelope in front of me. The address line caught my attention: "To Mr. T, Kikuchi-sensei's editor." Clearly written in a woman's hand.

"Can I see that?" I said, not a little enviously.

"Sure," he said, with a clear sense of superiority.

I extracted the letter with nervous hands, and tasted my second shock. It was quite thick, and that wasn't the letter alone. A handwritten booklet was enclosed, sporting an illustration of what looked very much like me draped in a black cloak, fangs bared, and menacing a rosy-cheeked Mr. T as he scrambled after the manuscript, stars twinkling in his cute round eyes.

That by itself would be tolerable, and that by itself wouldn't have left Mr. T so pleased with himself. But cranking up the random factor one more notch, there was a veritable monograph accompanying the illustration.

The abiding passion for Mr. T recounted within it went on and on. The exact details I have expunged from my envious mind, and so I will abridge.

In short, she poured forth her sympathy—nay, love—for Mr. T, languishing as he was under the lash of a devil of a writer (me), who flaunted deadlines, pretended to be out when he was in, missed appointments, and delivered manuscripts less than half the length promised, all leaving him more dead than alive.

There's no way he can deny it now. I saw it with my own two eyes, and pretty much as I've described. From "Reading Kikuchi-sensei's novels, I have gained a whole new understanding of Mr. T's travails" to "Hang in there. I'm pulling for you."

Anybody who couldn't read the love oozing out between the lines didn't have a heart. She must see Mr. T and me at each other's throats.

Curious to know exactly who could have written such a missive, I looked down at the signature. All it said was: "One of Mr. T's female supporters." No name.

Perhaps there was something on the back of the envelope, but it was blank.

When I pressed Mr. T about this, he confirmed that there was indeed another envelope with the name, address and phone number, but he'd left it at home.

I smelled a rat, and threatened to expose him in an essay I was writing for a certain magazine. Mr. T was unmoved. "I'll bring a photograph!" he proposed, only exacerbating my incandescent sense of frustration.

In any case, *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess*, Vol. 5 was

completed with this sort of give-and-take going on. I never got around to thanking Mr. T for all his hard work on the book.

Then one day several months later, I saw for myself. Saw what? That's a secret for now. All shall be revealed in the next installment. "Heh, heh, heh," indeed.

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Bram Stoker's Dracula)

October 30, 1990

Original Volume VI Afterword

Well, Volume Six is finally in the bag.

The plan was to wrap things up after one more, bringing the total to seven. But after reading the draft of Volume Seven for the serial publication, Mr. T arched his brows and said things like, “So this is Volume Seven.”

The guy who for some unfathomable reason got a love letter from one of *my* readers. Who apparently didn’t give a damn about me, the writer. Nothing I said made a dent, so eventually I stopped sparring with him.

“How about you swap him for a female editor?” I implored, going over his head to the managing editor.

But instead of hopping right on it, now Mr. T comes calling practically daily.

Thinking this was rather odd, I made another call to the head honcho. This time, listening carefully, I swore I could hear echoes of Mr. T in his voice.

Come to think of it, when another editor answers my phone calls and tells me to hold on a minute, I’m sure I can hear them laughing under their breath. I wouldn’t dismiss the possibility that the entire editorial department has been yanking my chain, forwarding my calls to Mr. T whenever I ask for the chief.

Perhaps Mr. T was promoted to managing editor and didn’t tell

me! And the next time I started grumbling about going on a writer's strike until I got paid, he'd throw out his chest and say, "Don't be an idiot. *I'm* the one in charge!"

(And what would happen if he did?)

Now that I think about it, what Mr. T does doesn't seem in line with what normal "editors" are supposed to do. And here we return to the subject matter of the *Yashakiden: The Demon Princess*, Vol. 5 afterword.

I've already recounted how Mr. T received a love letter from one of my readers. A short time later, the time came for writing the serialization and Mr. T visited my humble abode again. I know this is an anxiety associated with newbie authors, but I became overly aware of what my editor was up to in the next room.

Concentrating my attention on the manuscript in front of me, or wasting time watching a video of *Toya-san's Big Fat Diary* (produced by me), I couldn't help thinking anxiously, "What the hell is he up to?"

I imagined that the door to the next room was cracked open and an eyeball was peering at me. If he was on the phone, I imagined him bad-mouthing me to the illustrator or the printer. If the room fell silent, well, maybe he just went and hanged himself. Hear snoring and I'd be seized by the impulse to plant a smelly fish on his chest and sic the cat on him.

My head was filled with a hornet's nest of thoughts.

This day, though, the aura emanating from Mr. T's room was

different than usual. I can't really explain how, except that it was.

Normally he would have been marking up manuscripts and doing galley checks. After that he'd read or watch TV or take a nap. Noticing that he'd departed from this routine, I crept to the door and peeked in. Mr. T was writing something. Not with his normal red ballpoint, but with a fountain pen. And with an unusually serious look on his face.

He was applying that fountain pen—not to a manuscript or lined paper—but to what looked an awful lot like fancy stationery. Thanks to the small room and the size of the characters he was writing, I could read the kanji he'd just finished: *love*.

What the hell?

Perhaps a reply to that love letter. Having seen the evidence of her passions—and in possession of her address and photograph and phone number—Mr. T was sending her an answer.

"Hey!" I called out. Mr. T started at the sound of my voice and hid the letter under a notebook. "What are you cooking up in there?"

"I'm not cooking up anything. Don't get the wrong idea."

"What wrong idea? Who said anything about wrong ideas?"

"You saw?"

"Your love letter?"

"You're jumping to the wrong conclusion."

"About words like *love*, you mean?"

“It’s not what it looks like.”

“I’m not going to launch an investigation. I’ll settle for an address, phone number, and photograph.”

“No way.”

This was not, I assure you, the defiance of a man rising to his chivalrous duty in defending a woman’s honor, but of a lion guarding his harem.

In the end, Mr. T didn’t show me his reply, or an address or anything else. A few days later at a Kadokawa bookstore signing in Yokohama, I met the woman in question.

But I can just as well reveal her identity next time.

For now, there’s something else I need to put down in black and white.

I believe it was around that time that I was going through the motions working on a manuscript while watching a late night movie, *She Was Like a Wild Chrysanthemum* (1955), directed by Keisuke Kinoshita. This wasn’t one of the later versions with Michiyo Yasuda or Momoe Yamaguchi, but the original starring Noriko Arita.

Movies this tragic are rare these days. The movie is a reminiscence of youth, the story of two young (even adolescent) lovers during the Meiji period, the victims of their feudalistic families, torn apart as they become attached to each other. The wife is ultimately rejected by her husband’s family and returns home to die from a broken heart.

That alone should not have been the end of the world for him. Though having lost his true love, this young man still had his whole life ahead of him. While holding her memories in his heart, he could have led a full life, perhaps happily remarried.

But as I have noted, this is a movie about reminiscences.

And these reminiscences belonged to a worn-out old man played by a then middle-aged Ryu Chishu (perhaps best known for *Tokyo Story*). Glowing on the television screen were the beautiful mountains of Shinshu. Yet projected against that scenic backdrop was no evidence of the lively youngster and his tale of loss.

From Ryu Chishu's appearance, we can easily surmise a life—a world—hemmed in from the start, without a future in sight, whose only redeeming feature is its ordinariness. To be cruelly direct, we can see where this brief and beautiful love is headed straight from the beginning.

Her bitter tears are guaranteed to put us through the wringer (making the viewer feel literally wrung out), and I can't say this sort of entertainment is my cup of tea. And yet I couldn't tear my eyes away.

While spinning this story of hopeless despair, youth and spirit poured forth from the screen. Keisuke Kinoshita was forty-two at the time and in his prime. In 1954, he directed *Twenty-Four Eyes*. In 1957, *Times of Joy and Sorrow*, and *The Ballad of Narayama* in 1958.

The vision of the creator is fully realized on the screen. A movie is truly a living thing. From the cool and concrete lyricism of the

scene on the wharf from which the protagonist leaves the town as a young man, to the decrepit old man walking along a country road, the film comes alive with life.

When the older brother (Takahiro Tamura) brusquely tells him, "Tami-san is dead," the tears well up. And her death scene makes them fall like rain. It's been a long time since I've cried watching a movie. The movies I usually watch are just movies.

Anyway, as if to prove that God is dead and the Devil lives, halfway through the broadcast peals of loud laughter utterly unbecoming to the moment erupted in the adjoining room, and continued even as the old man visited her grave in the closing scene.

Needless to say, I flung open the door, breathing fire. "Huh?" said Mr. T. There were tears in his eyes, too. But not from grief. I looked at the television screen. It was a television special featuring the 1980s comedy trio B-21.

"I-I-I—" I stammered in a rage. "I can't believe you're watching that!"

Mr. T grinned. "Here you go," he said, handing me the marked-up manuscript.

I snapped, "You know, I've been watching *She Was Like a Wild Chrysanthemum*. Try to exercise a little self-control."

He stared at me. "And?"

"It's a classic! You and your big mouth completely ruined the mood!"

“Yeah, but these B-21 specials are such a hoot.”

The conversation was going nowhere so I marched back to my room. Thinking back on it, even now I still get pissed off. Sending that guy a love letter! Starting a fan club (proposed, supposedly) for him! No need to tell me the world was spinning out of control!

Well, next time I’ll spill the beans about the writer of that letter and her encounter with me.

Don’t miss it!

In this volume, the story takes several bold new turns. Setsura loses trusted allies and defeats a powerful enemy. Shinjuku welcomes a new character to its teeming stage.

Will Demon City fall into the grips of a living darkness, or vanish in a deadly rainbow of destruction? The story continues and the looming resolution beckons. Until that day, I intend to keep my faithful readers turning the pages. I hope you enjoy the read!

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Vampire’s Kiss)

March 17, 1991

The Gleeful Joy in Kikuchi's Horror

Why do the books of Hideyuki Kikuchi brim with so much vim and vigor? Horror novels aren't supposed to be a source of spirited good cheer. Fear and trembling and other similar emotions surely spring to mind. But no.

Read any other horror novel—from Kadokawa or elsewhere—and I feel like I'm sinking to the bottom of the earth. Kikuchi's alone possess that unusually energetic spark. (And to be sure, the worlds he creates rarely confine themselves to the narrow frame of genre horror.)

There are several reasons for this, I think. I'll try to summarize my thoughts about them here.

The first book I encountered of his was *Vampire Hunter D*. It came highly recommended by the *shojo* manga artist Meruhen Meka-san and her younger sister, the writer Yufuko Seno. Kikuchi gained great popularity with the creation of this strikingly handsome superhero. But what struck me the most was his powers of description.

D crosses swords with a rival. Their paths intersect in the air and fly apart. The action advances frame by frame as he lays out the scene with a detailed and dynamic eye. No more than five seconds would have elapsed in real time, but reading to the end may take a minute. The visual imagery is so clearly created that it should be savored slowly.

“So this is what it means to be a writer,” I remember sighing.

His subsequent fame and prodigious output is well known. He concludes his afterwords with the title of a horror film he happened to be watching at the time. That tells me he is a movie fan with strong visual senses. This “camera eye” seems first of all to be at the foundation of Kikuchi’s writerly verve.

Rhythmically shifting points of view, the camera peers up from below, zooms in, elevates, pulls back, unsparingly delineating Setsura Aki’s profile. Or not just his profile, but his whole comely appearance.

The nimbleness of the author’s footwork, the obvious delight he takes in moving the camera around captures the imagination of the reader as well. The text very much becomes a literary feast for the eyes.

In Kikuchi’s world, beauty spills from every page. It’s almost as if he is peeking into the secret desires of his (female) readers. This is true to an extent of all his series, but *Demon City Blues* in particular boasts of two great Adonises, Setsura Aki and Doctor Mephisto. When the two of them mount the stage together, the radiant combination—as if scattering golden pixie dust with every step—is enough to make a girl swoon.

Since appearing in paperback, I can’t help noticing pages where, if three adjectives make for company, then the word “beauty” becomes a crowd.

So that’s what it’s come down to, eh? Heh. I can’t keep myself from grinning. The fact is, when Setsura Aki’s name is on the page,

my reading pace slows to a third of normal.

This is a bit off-subject, but clear and compelling descriptions of a handsome leading man do not by themselves constitute the source of high-spirited prose.

A man shot from behind, his chest exploding outwards—a big raven split neatly in two—a body landing heavily on a strand of devil wire—a vampire hanging upside down with his feet planted on the ceiling—bloody clay oozing out of the floor and coagulating into a porcelain doll—

Herein are the pleasures of an unstoppable vision, gliding easily from one vivid description to the next, while we mere mortals remained trapped inside the frame of the physical world and its unalterable laws.

In that world, the hammer splits the rock—the ax cuts down the tree—water always finds its own level—and the dead stay dead—the world of the commonplace and the mundane, it could be said.

In Demon City, however, people can rise from the dead over and over, be smashed into walls, be cut in two, propagate and divide, adhere themselves to others, stretch and contract, dissolve and go up in flames, lose their heads and grow them back again.

The will to live of such beings can't help but infuse the reader as well.

And—for lack of a better word—the freedom it represents. In volume two, the giant mollusk slumbering beneath Shinjuku awakens. Its nightmares gush forth. The tentacles sprouting from

Setsura's back threaten to remake the world. The intense feeling of déjà vu this scene imparts almost makes me believe that the author himself is the true seer, and his novels are composed while in a phantasmal state.

The dream world is infinitely pliable, the freedom to mold and shape matter and substance unconstrained. A man can sink his fingers into the flesh of another. A lover turned to dust can flitter around the beloved.

Kikuchi's world—and especially the world of *Demon City Blues*—arouses that sense of the self and the world that comes alive when dwelling in an embryonic dream.

The knack of watching horror movies is to maintain an awareness of the frame in which the screen is set. Rather than drowning in the center of the screen, always being conscious of the frame keeps the fear at a distance. And often does more than keep it at a distance, but fosters the ability to take these monsters and ghosts anything but seriously.

I don't think anybody has pointed this out before, but one of the things I enjoy most about Kikuchi's novels is the sense of humor permeating them. In volume one, the shop girl at Aki teases him:

> "It's the middle of summer and all, so why are you wearing that black slicker?"
>
> "I was born wearing it."

And at a bar, after draining a shot glass:

"How was it?"

"Not to my taste."

"Eh?"

"At least I wouldn't serve up chocolate corn nuts as a side. *Senbei* is the only way to really enjoy a whiskey."

A long silence followed.

And then there's this description:

> His head sat several inches away from his stretched-out arms, like a football player who'd leapt forward to make a catch and missed. The mouth opened and closed silently, mimicking a stranded fish.

With a mixture of metaphors like this—that you should hope never to see illustrated in the real world—clearly seeing the "frame" of the picture allows Kikuchi's readers to revel in the ghastly delights of the imagery, in stories of hell as crisp and clear as the blue sky above.

Such is the power of the terrifying beauty that no matter how heartless the slaughter or cruel the betrayal, we condone them like the acts of a mighty destroying angel.

In Kikuchi's world, demons don't win with their superpowers and their brute willingness to kill and maim alone—which is not to say that such attributes don't come in handy—but here nothing trumps the power of beauty. Like Medusa, view it for five minutes and you

can’t pull away, even as it sears your eyeballs.

And the otherworldly countenance of Doctor Mephisto—in less than half that time, it caused the face-like tumors covering the body of a certain actress to disappear. The tumors must have died entranced and enthralled.

This is not the beauty of a superficial aesthetic. This is the power of a beauty that controls, seduces, intoxicates, enervates, and makes of its followers obedient slaves.

Speaking of power, let’s finish up the discussion with that. The biggest reason for the sheer audacity communicated by the Kikuchi oeuvre is the sense of verisimilitude created by things like *devil wire* and *qi*. Though appearing preposterous, the wires wielded by Setsura Aki give him command of any given space down to the nooks and crannies, twining them around an opponent’s body and severing at will.

The invisible threads stretched around a space make it an extension of his mind, that can be activated by a mere thought. The same as the *qi* that expands from the body and penetrates the surrounding area. As for the latter, Kikuchi has long integrated material from the martial arts into his books.

Among them, the Nishino Breathing Method. The way Takako Kanan controls her own mind and spirit in the first volume rings a clear bell. A far, far cry from the *qi* that Ryuuki and Yakou battle with. But these glimpses of *qi* and its effects, and the descriptions of the power projected by its users, these hints of their true natures are deeply moving.

I come away feeling that these are not simply arbitrary inventions of the author's creative mind, but in fact real things. Not that such things actually exist in the world. Rather, that it is possible to grasp the true essence of otherwise abstract things like space and gravity.

I should like to feel the outrushing of that beautiful binary star, Setsura Aki's devil wires, to see the tendrils of a person's spirit as it scampers through space, and feel the thrill in the body as well as the soul.

I did not get around to explaining the essentials of the story. In fact, though I have read all of Kikuchi's books, they all have disturbed and fascinated my mind such that I find it difficult to pull apart and separate the elements of each. Not to mention that I can utterly lose myself within a single series.

Simply reading the story-so-far prefaces in volumes two through eight of the original paperback series is enough to convince me the editor must be a genius just to keep track of the whole thing. That scene, that description, involving Setsura or Mephisto or Nuvenberg —where and how did it come up in the story again?

No need to wonder. Thanks to this assignment, I've reread *Maoden* and *Demon City Blues* and more, inspiring me to once again contemplate the talents of the exemplary writer of fantasy literature that is Hideyuki Kikuchi.

Akemi Itsuji

YASHAKIDEN
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ISBN 978-1-56970-148-5

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